THE VALUE OF DEBATE IN THE CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

by Stephen Rippon, Tall Oaks Classical School

The purpose of this article is to encourage teachers to use debate as an activity in classrooms and even in competition with other schools. There are several benefits to debate as an activity for our students. First, debate fits well within a classical Christian curriculum. Second, debate develops students' thinking by motivating them to conduct quality research, to be better listeners, and to understand different perspectives on an issue. Finally, debate hones students' skills in speaking persuasively, concisely, and graciously.

WHAT IS DEBATE?

One principle I have learned in teaching debate is the importance of establishing definitions up front, so participants do not talk past each other. As defined in *The Debater's Guide*, debate is "formal oral controversy consisting of the systematic presentation of opposing arguments on a selected topic."[1] I would expand the definition because debate does not have to be oral—and while we practice debate with formal structures, the concept of debate may include other sorts of dialogue and decision-making. For example, we speak of one having internal debates. As the authors of *The Debater's Guide* observe, "every genuine choice involves a genuine debate."[2]

Some other key terms are important to know. A proposition, or resolution, is "a judgment expressed in a declarative statement. In debate, it appears as an affirmative statement of the question to be resolved."[3] The affirmative, or pro, side tries to persuade the audience or judge to accept the proposition under debate, while the negative, or con, side tries to prevent the affirmative side's effort by direct or indirect refutation.

A good debate will meet three burdens: proof, rebuttal, and communication.[4] The burden of proof is the obligation of debaters to support each of their assertions with some sort of proof, defined as "whatever tends to create belief,"[5] including both evidence and reasoning. The burden of rebuttal is the obligation of debaters to advance the debate by listening well and responding to the arguments of the opponents. Finally, the burden of communication is the obligation of each debater to speak at a tone and rate which enables an audience to follow and to respond. Good communication includes being able to convey a clear outline to the listeners so that they can keep track of the arguments under consideration. The challenge of meeting all three burdens makes debate a superb educational activity.

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DEBATE'S PLACE IN THE CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN CURRICULUM

It is well known that when children reach the middle-school years, they enter what Dorothy Sayers called the "Pert" stage. They become critical and enjoy catching others in contradictions. Sayers argued that these years are ideal to introduce elements of dialectic into the curriculum.[6]

Similarly, in their book *Wisdom and Eloquence*, Robert Littlejohn and Charles Evans observe that debate has a place in the logic/dialectic part of the classical curriculum. They write,

> In addition to logic, or perhaps as part of the formal instruction in logic, students should be introduced to the principles of debate . . . . As students are learning to reason their way through issues and to construct their thoughts into formal syllogisms, affinity for and pleasure in argumentation develops naturally. Providing such students with rules for civil discourse, whether derived from forensic debate or Lincoln-Douglas-style debate or even from simple principles of courteous classroom discussion, can channel otherwise disruptive energies into valuable learning experiences.[7]

Tall Oaks Classical School includes Argumentation & Debate as a required course for all ninth-grade students, following their eighth-grade Logic course. When I first came to Tall Oaks, Argumentation & Debate was the course I was most anxious about teaching, because I had no experience teaching debate and had never participated in debate as a student. I was grateful for materials I inherited from the previous teacher, including *The Debater's Guide*.

What really encouraged me as a new debate teacher was the opportunity to compete against students from another classical Christian school, Rockbridge Academy, located about a 90-minute drive away from us, in Maryland. Their debate teacher at the time invited me to observe his debate class, and later to a tournament that they hosted as part of the Mid-Atlantic Christian Debate League (MACDL), which also includes Summit Christian Academy in Yorktown, Virginia. Having a specific topic to prepare was a great motivation to my students to do research and write cases.

Since then, I have taught ninth-grade Argumentation & Debate each year. One of the things I enjoy most about teaching debate is that, since we work on several different topics each year, I, along with the students, learn about a variety of current events, in contrast to the world of old books which much of our reading and teaching revolves around. The contrast is fruitful for us: having the access to wisdom of the ancients enhances the quality of debates we have.

As a teacher, another refreshing aspect of debate is that once I establish a few ground rules, I don't have to say much. I sit down and watch the students speak to each other, as I take the role of the moderator. In other classroom activities like Great Books-style shared inquiry discussions or Socratic-style discussions, I as the teacher often succumb to the temptation to control the discussion according to my agenda. Debate is the best way I know to let students take responsibility for their own learning. Preparing for, engaging in, and then reflecting on debates fulfills one of John Milton Gregory's *Seven Laws of Teaching*, the Law of the Teaching Process, which is to "excite and direct the self-activities of the learning, and tell him nothing that he can learn himself."[8]

Debate has its roots in the ancient world. We see examples in Scripture and in the foundational works of *Western Civilization* by Homer and Hesiod. Perhaps the debater's favorite Bible verse would be Proverbs 18:17, which says, "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him." The

book of Job contains a debate among Job and his friends about the reason for Job's suffering. We see various disputes in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* among humans and among gods about which course of action to take. We also see internal debates, such as when Achilleus struggles with whether or not to kill Agamemnon on the spot after Agamemnon announces his intention to seize Briseis, Achilleus' war prize. Hesiod, in *Works and Days*, mentions debate as an entertaining distraction from work, admonishing his lazy brother not to be "a spectator of disputes, a listener at the debate," because "[l]ittle business has a man with disputes and debates who has not food for the year laid up at home in its ripeness . . ."[9]

One excellent resource for a historical Christian perspective of debate is Isaac Watts' *On the Improvement of the Mind*. Over several chapters, Watts advocates for the role of debate in developing one's mind. Watts distinguishes three types of disputes—Socratic, forensic, and scholastic—and gives instructions on how to engage in each one. Watts' discussion is particularly valuable because he does it with reference to debating with integrity *as a Christian*—not just for the sake of winning, but for seeking the truth: "Keep this always therefore upon your Mind as an everlasting Rule of Conduct in your Debates to find out Truth, that a resolute Design, or even a warm Affectation of Victory, is the Bane of all real Improvement, and an effectual Bar against the Admission of the Truth which you profess to seek."[10]

The first type of debate Watts mentions is Socratic debate, which took place among philosophers, as seen in Plato's Socratic dialogues. We use forms of debate that include aspects of Socratic method in the cross-examination sections. Watts also discusses forensic disputation, which took place in the ancient assemblies of Athens and Rome to deal with criminal cases or discuss matters of policy, and we still see it in modern political and ecclesiastical assemblies. One person makes a speech in favor of something while another makes a speech against it, and a moderator keeps order. A third type of disputation, called scholastic or syllogistic disputation, flowed from a more rigorous application of formal logic, and became a key part of scholarly engagement from the medieval world through the eighteenth century.

A modern historian of debate, David Potter, describes the use of debate as part of the curriculum in America's colonial colleges. In the early years of colleges including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Brown, debates took place in the form of syllogistic disputation, conducted entirely in Latin. One student would be chosen to make an argument. Other students would then be required to oppose the first student by denying the major or minor premises, or by questioning the usage of key words in the original argument. As Potter explains in his article "The Debate Tradition,"[11] the syllogistic disputation gave way to forensic disputation in the university as Latin and formal logic fell out of use. Students would debate topics of theological, political, or cultural interest under supervision of the faculty or president of the college. In the nineteenth century, forensic disputation also faded from the curriculum, but became an extracurricular activity. College students would form debate clubs with avid participation. Just as intercollegiate athletics were on the rise, intercollegiate debates also generated great interest.[11] Competitive debate spread from colleges to high schools in the early twentieth century and has become a thriving activity that, despite some problems, still has great pedagogical value.

DEBATE'S ROLE IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' THINKING

Debate improves students' thinking, first, by motivating them to conduct quality research in order to meet the Burden of Proof. In a debate, students are assigned to make the best possible case for or against a resolution, regardless of their own personal stance. *The Debater's Guide* sets out seven criteria for good

evidence, which I have my students memorize as a way to check their own sources and interrogate their opponents' sources: their evidence must be recent, accurate, from a reliable source, readily available and verifiable, generally acceptable to the audience, free from obvious bias, and directly germane to the topic under discussion.[12] Meeting all these criteria can be a challenge, but given the competitive nature of debate, students spur each other on to find the best evidence possible. In a debate, students can expect to be cross-examined by their opponents on the sources and their credentials—no one wants to be accused of or found using so-called "fake news." If they are not prepared with good evidence, their opponent can seriously exploit that to their own advantage.

Evidence is only one part of proving an argument. Assuming that both sides have good evidence, the focus of the debate becomes the ability to make logical connections, drawing on the evidence and using reasoning to arrive at conclusions. Here, students will be careful to detect and to avoid fallacious logical reasoning, and they will challenge each other to show why their arguments are more significant than their opponents'.

Since students are often challenged to develop cases for both sides of a resolution, some might be concerned that debate encourages relativism by having to advocate for a position that they don't agree with—or even one that clearly violates Scripture. In debate, are we merely creating Sophists, who could make the weaker argument seem stronger?

I have come to see that being able to fully and fairly articulate the best arguments on either side of an issue leads to greater clarity. In arguments with others, it is tempting to dismiss an opposing view by making a "straw man" out of it—distorting what our opponent is saying to make it easier to refute. When debaters are prepared to argue both sides of a debate, they become familiar with the strongest arguments for each side so that they may advocate convincingly for them. This can be challenging in a Christian school where we have certain non-negotiables about doctrine and ethics; somebody has to be the "devil's advocate," so to speak.

At the 2017 ACCS Conference, Bruce Etter made a presentation, "Pedagogical Lessons from Dostoevsky," showing how the great Russian author, through the character Ivan Karamazov, articulated the strongest possible case for rejecting God. In order to fully understand the ideas we are up against, we need to be intellectually honest enough to confront them in their most compelling possible form—Etter calls this the "Dostoevsky Principle."[13] Debate is an exercise that allows students to practice the "Dostoevsky Principle" in a structured setting, as preparation for challenges they will face beyond our school walls.

In a tournament, it is understood that whichever side a team is assigned to advocate—often determined by a coin flip or by a computer-program-generated schematic—does not necessarily represent the actual views of the debaters. Judges are also instructed to bracket out their preexisting views on a subject and judge the round based only on what is presented within that round. Over a tournament of several rounds, teams usually have to debate each side at least once; in order to win, debaters must be able to present each side convincingly.

Even though I quoted Isaac Watts on the principle of debating for the sake of truth, and not to win, there are benefits to the competitive nature of debate. The competitive aspect may motivate otherwise indifferent students to do research, make logical connections, and practice clarity in speaking.

Even when considered as games, debates do have educational value. Michael D. Bartanen and Robert S. Littlefield observe that competitive debate provides three benefits: simulation, socialization, and the creation of social capital. Regarding simulation, the authors explain, "By adopting rules and processes familiar to

the courtroom and legislative chamber—taking turns, introducing and questioning the quality of the evidence, and cross-examination—participants practiced in a relatively low-risk environment the techniques needed for future success, instinctively grasping the nuance of the actual context and situation where policy decisions or particular rulings might affect real-life lives and livelihoods of individuals."[14] While it is only play now, it is also practice for real life.

On the benefit of socialization, Bartanen and Littlefield point out that debate tournaments are a way for students to meet others with shared interests. We have experienced this, too. Classical Christian schools are still few and far between, so it has been good for me and my students to meet with other like-minded faculty and students from Rockbridge and Summit. And even when we participate in secular tournaments, the interactions help our students better understand their peers from different backgrounds.

Finally, Bartanen and Littlefield observe that debates create social capital by broadening the students' knowledge about controversial social and political issues. Students become better citizens and are equipped to become more knowledgeable and empathetic leaders. I, too, learn a lot about current topics as I observe student debates!

DEBATE'S ROLE IN FORMING STRONG COMMUNICATORS

In addition to fostering clearer thinking, debate also challenges students to improve their rhetorical skills. Before a round of debate, debaters may be prepared with their opening speeches, and may also have parts of their rebuttal speeches ready if they anticipated correctly what their opponents would argue, but often they need to think and respond on their feet. I find that speakers become more dynamic in those situations of clash—they are more animated and energetic than when delivering a prepared speech.

One especially helpful thing about formal debate is that each side has the same amount of time to make their case, creating a level playing field among the different types of student personalities: naturally verbose or talkative students must practice being concise because of the time limit, while naturally terse or shy students are challenged to unfold their thoughts more fully, lest they waste the time given to them. As they practice speaking in these on-the-spot situations, they gain more confidence overall.

Still, some concerns may arise that contemporary high school debate culture does not value good speaking. If you go to a typical high school tournament, you may encounter rapid speaking and jargon-laden language that the average person cannot follow.[15] However, there are competitions that do value eloquent and persuasive speech, not merely information. In the MACDL, we use the Public Forum Debate format in our tournaments. Public Forum is a two-on-two format, usually on a current controversy, and is designed to be judged by non-experts—usually parents of debaters—so jargon and speed-talking are discouraged.[16]

Besides using Public Forum Debate, there are two events that our students enter each year where they are rewarded for good rhetoric, not just rapid-fire delivery of evidence. I recommend the Ronald Reagan Great Communicator Debate as one that explicitly discourages rapid speech and jargon while encouraging ethos, logos, and pathos in a one-on-one "Presidential Format." The Great Communicator Debates encourage students to tell stories as part of their persuasive appeal, like President Ronald Reagan did, and they even show videos of Reagan's speeches in their judges' training.[17]

Another series of tournaments for middle to high schoolers that discourages rapid speaking is Big Questions Debate. They use a format similar to Public Forum, but with topics that pertain to worldview issues at the intersection of science, philosophy, and religion. These debates are sponsored by the Templeton

Foundation and offer grants for schools willing to hold debates for as few as fifteen competitors.[18]

At Tall Oaks, debate has been helpful in producing students who think with clarity and who speak with eloquence, confidence, and grace. I highly encourage you to implement some debates as activities in your classrooms, whether as part of a logic or rhetoric course, or as a way to understand both sides of a controversy in a literature, history, theology, or science course. You will find that debate motivates students to do high-quality research, to think with clarity, and to communicate effectively.

NOTES:

1. *The Debater's Guide,* Fourth Edition, ed. Jon M. Ericson, James J. Murphy, and Raymond Bud Zeuschner (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 122.

2. Ibid., 4.

3. Ibid., 124.

4. Ibid., 22-24.

5. Ibid., 24.

6. Dorothy Sayers, "The Lost Tools of Learning," in *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning: An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education* by Douglas Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 153.

7. Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans, *Wisdom and Eloquence: A Christian Paradigm for Classical Learning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 110.

8. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (Lancaster, PA: Veritas Press, 2004), 100.

9. Hesiod, *Works and Days* in *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, trans. M.L. West (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1999), 38.

10. Isaac Watts, *The Improvement of the Mind*, 2nd ed. (London: Brackstone and Longman, 1743), 154. Accessed via Google Books.

11. David Potter, "The Debate Tradition," in *Argumentation and Debate: Principles and Practices* revised edition, ed. James H. McBath (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963), 14-32.

12. *The Debater's Guide*, 43.

13. Bruce Etter, "Pedagogical Lessons from Dostoevsky," presentation at the ACCS Repairing the Ruins Conference, June 2017. Recording available at the ACCS Member Resource Center: https://mrc.classicalchristian.org/library_posts/pedagogical-lessons-from-dostoevsky-bruce-etter/

14. Michael D. Bartanen and Robert S. Littlefield, "Competitive Speech and Debate: How Play Influences American Educational Practice," *American Journal of Play* 7.2 (Winter 2015), 163-164.

15. For example, see Jack McCordick, "The Corrosion of High-School Debate—And How It Mirrors American Politics," *America Magazine*, 26 September 2017, accessed at https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/09/26/corrosion-high-school-debate-and-how-it-mirrors-american-politics

16. For more information on Public Forum Debate, see the information under Public Forum Debate at https://www.speechanddebate.org/competition-events/

17. For more information on the Ronald Reagan Great Communicator Debate Series, see https://www.reaganfoundation.org/education/scholarship-programs/great-communicator-debate-series/

18. For more information on Big Questions Debate, see https://www.speechanddebate.org/big-questions.