

Preacher, Chris Ayers

## The Great Debates

I'm going to read two scripture passages and then you are going to have the privilege of helping me, assisting me, with today's sermon introduction. Don't you feel special? And for your aid----are you ready for this?---for your assistance I'm going to give you some of those highly sought after Pastor Points.

Here's the first scripture lesson, Exodus 12:1-3, 9.

1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt,

2 "This month shall be for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.

3 Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month they shall take every man a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household;

9 Do not eat any of it raw or boiled with water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts.

Here's the second scripture lesson, Deuteronomy 16:5-7.

5 You may not offer the passover sacrifice within any of your towns which the LORD your God gives you;

6 but at the place which the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell in it, there you shall offer the passover sacrifice, in the evening at the going down of the sun, at the time you came out of Egypt.

7 And you shall boil it and eat it at the place which the LORD your God will choose; and in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents.

And now I need your help with a sermon introduction. For thirty-five Pastor Points name some famous debates. It can be an actual debate like a Presidential or congressional debate (Hint. Hint.) or it can be a famous debate in the general public or at a trial. (Hint. Hint.)

## The Lincoln-Douglas debates

The Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 were a series of seven debates between Abraham Lincoln, a Republican, and Stephen A. Douglas, a Democrat, for an Illinois seat in the United States Senate. At the time, U.S. Senators were elected by state legislatures; thus Lincoln and Douglas were campaigning for their respective parties to win control of the legislature. The debates foreshadowed the issues Lincoln faced in the 1860 Presidential campaign and are remembered partially for the eloquence of both sides. Practically the only issue discussed was slavery.

After the election for Senator in Illinois, Lincoln edited the texts of all the debates and had them published in a book. The wide-spread coverage of the original debates and the subsequent

popularity of the book led eventually to Lincoln's nomination for President of the United States by the Republican Party meeting in convention in Chicago in 1860.

Have you ever had a debate that prepared you for something in your future?

Science verses Religion debate or more accurately Evolution verses Fundamentalism debate---  
Scopes Monkey Trial

The "Scopes Trial", often called the "Scopes Monkey Trial" was a watershed in the creation-evolution controversy that pitted lawyers William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow against each other in an American legal case that tested a law passed on March 13, 1925, which forbade the teaching, in any state-funded educational establishment in Tennessee, of "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals."

John Scopes, a high school teacher, was arrested for teaching evolution from a chapter in a textbook which showed ideas developed from those set out in Charles Darwin's book *The Origin of Species*.

After eight days of trial, it took the jury only nine minutes to deliberate. Scopes was found guilty on July 21 and ordered to pay a \$100.00 fine. Judge Raulston imposed the fine before Scopes was given an opportunity to say anything about why the court should not impose punishment upon him. After the error was brought to the judge's attention the defendant spoke for the first and only time in court:

Your honor, I feel that I have been convicted of violating an unjust statute. I will continue in the future, as I have in the past, to oppose this law in any way I can. Any other action would be in violation of my ideal of academic freedom--that is, to teach the truth as guaranteed in our constitution, of personal and religious freedom. I think the fine is unjust.

The evolution verses religion debate continues even to this day, doesn't it?

Do you have some debates that seem to never go away?

The Kennedy Nixon Debate

On September 26, 1960, 70 million U.S. viewers tuned in to watch Senator John Kennedy of Massachusetts and Vice President Richard Nixon in the first-ever televised presidential debate. It was the first of four televised "Great Debates" between Kennedy and Nixon. The first debate centered on domestic issues. The high point of the second debate, on 7 October, was disagreement over U.S. involvement in two small islands off the coast of China. On October 21, during the final debate the candidates focused on American relations with Cuba.

The Great Debates marked television's grand entrance into presidential politics. They afforded the first real opportunity for voters to see their candidates in competition, and the visual contrast

was dramatic. In August, Nixon had seriously injured his knee and spent two weeks in the hospital. By the time of the first debate he was still twenty pounds underweight, and his face was still pale. He arrived at the debate in an ill-fitting shirt, and refused make-up to improve his color and lighten his perpetual "5:00 o'clock shadow." Kennedy, by contrast, had spent early September campaigning in California. He was tan and confident and well-rested. "I had never seen him looking so fit," Nixon later wrote.

In substance, the candidates were much more evenly matched. Indeed, those who heard the first debate on the radio pronounced Nixon the winner. But the 70 million who watched television saw Nixon still sickly and obviously discomforted and were impressed by Kennedy's smooth delivery and charisma. Those television viewers focused on what they saw, not what they heard and perceived Kennedy the winner of the first debate by a very large margin.

How many debates have you won? How many have you lost?

Well, those are some famous debates. While none of your own personal debates are on the famous debate list, I bet you've had your share of debates and I bet some of your debates have been real "doosies".

If you've ever had a debate with your significant other/your beloved raise your hand high. Raise it high for God and everybody to see. Thank you.

If you've ever had a debate with your mother, the one who brought you into the world, raise your left hand and keep it up. Shame on you.

If you've ever had a debate with your father raise your hand and make into a fist.

If you've ever had a debate with a math teacher raise your hand and form a zero with your fingers. You folk are living on the edge.

If you've ever had a debate with a child, either your own child or someone else's child, raise your hand.

If you've ever had a debate with a Baptist preacher say Amen. You people are crazy, beyond hope.

Some of you since Emil's sermon last sermon have been debating me about the proper length of a sermon, a measly fifteen minutes you say. A healthy 20 minutes I say. If you are only going to speak for 15 minutes you are going to have to call a meditation, not a sermon. Gosh, yall are spoiled.

I'm going to tell you in a few minutes why I'm raising this issue of debates but first I want to turn your attention to the big screen, that is, a current movie.

Don't you just love post vacation sermons! Post vacation sermon are always going include an illustration from a movie. Well, the movie I saw while on vacation was a good one. Had Robin Williams in it. Love that man. Funny, funny, funny.

In this particular movie Williams played the role of a priest. Yes, a clergyperson. The movie was License to Wed. Permit me to mess up the movie for those of you who haven't seen it.

(Henceforth and forevermore you'll go see the movies you want to see before the Pastor gets back from vacation. You'll learn.)

In the movie there is a young man, Ben, and a young woman, Sadie, who want to get married and live happily ever after. They are bug eyed in love. They never argue about anything. It's a very superficial relationship. Well, the plot thickens. Sadie's family wants their young woman to get married at the family church. The groom prefers a Caribbean wedding but hey he'll give in. Little does he know. The priest at the church, Reverend Frank, won't bless Ben and Sadie's union until they pass his patented, "foolproof" marriage-prep course consisting of outrageous classes, outlandish homework assignments and some outright invasion of privacy. Let's just put it like this. Reverend Frank's rigorous curriculum puts Ben and Sadie's relationship to the test. Forget happily ever. Reverend Frank reveals incompatibilities that had lurked beneath the surface of their supposed argument-free relationship. As it turns out, Sadie wants 4 kids while Ben only wants 2. As it turns out, Ben and Sadie have little idiosyncrasies that get on each other's nerves. As it turns out, (and I love this part the best) Reverend Frank has the engaged couple engage in some free association exercises with members of the immediate family. Bride and groom and families members share words that come to their minds about each other. It gets a bit nasty. And what seemed like a relationship made in heaven becomes a relationship filled with debate.

Have you ever hidden your real self refusing to enter a debate? Have you ever opted for peace and tranquility over authenticity and integrity?

Or, have your relationships become dominated by debates that never get worked out?

Well, Ben and Sadie do get married. And in Jamaica of all places. Reverend Frank blesses their marriage because now he knows it is real and honest and can not only withstand debate but benefit from it.

I'd hate to have to count all the debates I've had with my beloved.

Teach me to marry an attorney.

Teach her to marry a Baptist preacher.

But you know, debate is not such a bad thing. In fact, I think there is a high cost of not having debate. Maybe only fools don't debate. Perhaps it's only blockheads who stand on their own supposed truths unable and unwilling to defend their ideas even while hearing and entertaining the thoughts of others.

The editors of the Bible apparently weren't blockheads and we can be thankful for that. Because what we have in the Bible is one big debate. Or more accurately, what we have are many debates running throughout the pages of the Church's scripture. It's almost like its one debate followed by another debate.

In his book *The Divine Symphony: The Bible's Many Voices* Israel Knohl, professor of Bible at Hebrew University in Jerusalem notes that the Bible starts with a debate between two contradictory accounts of creation. And the rest of his book is an analysis of other debates throughout the Hebrew Bible. Knohl observes, the editors of the Bible recognized that God speaks in many voices and people hear God in many ways. They did not want to mar the divine revelation so they created a pluralistic book.

Knohl goes on to point out that all rabbinic literature, including the Mishnah and the Talmud, follows this example and is based on debate. Contradictory views, opposing views, different views are put side by side. The main exception in Judaism to this practice is the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Qumran sect made an attempt to harmonize the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. They freed their scripture of its contradictions.

See why I didn't get too excited about the Qumran scrolls coming to Charlotte?

Well, the modern world, the contemporary Church, has its share of Qumran people, folk who can't tolerate or accept or entertain differences of opinion. There is one and only one truth and it is their truth. Just like the guy protesting our church the other Sunday. Just like the current pope.

The Vatican issued a document this past Tuesday restating its belief that the Catholic Church is the only true church of Jesus Christ. The document adds that Protestant denominations — called Christian Communities born out of the Reformation — are not true churches, but ecclesial communities.

One truth, says the Pope. Has he read the Bible?

Now I'm not saying one opinion is as valid as the next opinion. I'm not saying there's truth in every opinion. I am saying more opinions are valid than we acknowledge and I'm saying there's more truth in opinions with which we disagree than we have admitted. But mostly I'm saying the Bible sets a good example for us. Disagreements. Our two scripture lessons were just one example. One says you can't boil the Passover lamb, the other says that's the way to do it. In the following weeks I'll show you some more debates in the Bible, debates over much more important things than how to cook Passover lambs.

But my time---yes, my preaching time is running out today so I'll close with a story, a vacation story.

While on vacation two days after I finished reading *The Divine Symphony: The Bible's Many Voices* we used some free continental breakfast coupons given to us by the front desk attendant at the hotel. It's hard to get real excited about continental breakfasts after you've had a

Wedgewood breakfast, after you've had William Kruger's biscuits, o.k., I said it, but it was free and so we went. Had to wait on a waffle about five minutes. They only have one waffle machine. And even worse, guess what station was on the giant LED television?

Fox News!

It's weird how things happen. You read a book about respecting differences and pluralism and while waiting on your waffle you have to watch Fox News.

Here's a prayer. May the Bible train you and me to accept pluralism and debate. May the Bible teach us to learn from others.