

Preaching and Debating for Contrast

Preaching can often feel predicable and remote from contemporary life. How can our sermons have “bite” and be thought-provoking? Starting with Paul’s debating ministry in Acts, this session will explore how to include contrasts in our preaching, engage current thinkers and trends, address believers and nonbelievers simultaneously, and hold debates with exponents of other worldviews.

René Breuel is the lead pastor of Hopera, a church in Rome, Italy. He has a MDiv from Regent College, Canada; a MSt in Creative Writing from Oxford University; and is the author of *The Paradox of Happiness*. He is married to Sarah and is the father of two boys.

I. Introduction: Jesus’s love of neighbor vs. Freud’s love of self in neighbor

“Love your neighbor as your neighbor loves you.” Sigmund Freud

“If I love someone, he must deserve it in some way... He deserves it if he is so like me in important ways that I can love myself in him; and he deserves it if he is so much more perfect than myself that I can love my ideal of my own self in him.” Sigmund Freud

II. Biblical basis

There are numerous word-ministries in the Bible: teaching, exhorting, prophesying, evangelizing, reading, etc. We’ll focus on the ministry of reasoning, persuading, and debating.

Acts 9:28-29

“So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated (συνεζήτηται) with the Hellenistic Jews”

Acts 19:9

“He took the disciples with him and had discussions (διαλεγόμενος) daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.”

Acts 17:16-20

“While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned (διελέγετο μὲν οὖν ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ) in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate (συνέβαλλον) with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are

presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”

- Paul observes idols
- notices points of continuity and of contrast
- dialogue at the square (συνέβαλλον)
- invitation to Mars Hill

III. Preaching for contrast

- Address a double audience made of Christians and non-Christians
- Affirm their presence
- Honor their intelligence
- Address their concerns
- Include their “voices” through paraphrase
- Challenge their assumptions
- Quote authorities they respect. Three examples:
 - Lady Gaga’s Judas
 - Friedrich Nietzsche’s Prayer to the Unknown God
 - Cosmopolitan magazine

IV. Holding dialogues & debates

Our experiences

- crisis of faith in high school
- debating professor at university
- debate with atheists
- debate with Buddhists
- debate with Muslims

Principles

- Grace & truth
- Love and respect & honesty and clarity

How to organize dialogues & debates

- Identify a theme and a conversation partner
- Make an invitation
- Establish trust
- Organize the event
- Follow up with interested people

V. Practices to nurture the art of reasoning and debating

- Observation & reflection
- Diverse cultural diet
- Reading non-Christian authors (Alain de Botton, Luc Ferry)
- Reading fiction (Tolstoy, Austen, Dostoevsky)
- Learning from preachers who practice it (Tim Keller, Wonderingfair.com, Jonathan Sacks, *The Question of God*)