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The Great Debate

In Ghana, most teaching is by rote or by learning the material presented. In upper levels of education there are more opportunities for discussion and research but the latter is truly limited. Also limited are opportunities for creative thinking or having to grapple with academic exercises of thought. One class that I teach, *Theology of Church and Sacrament*, affords such opportunities.



I am grateful to the academic leadership of the Evangelical Presbyterian Seminary, for its willingness in allowing me to extend to the students alternative methods of teaching. The leadership also has a desire for the students to develop their own theological perspectives even if they differ from the official denominational dogma.

As a part of the study I put together for this course, we explored the Biblical, theological, and historical understandings of the sacrament of baptism. In conjunction we discussed methodology. After considering all of these variables, I divided the class into two teams. One team was to defend infant baptism while the other was in support of believer's baptism. In addition, each team had to consider other variables such as method, who could be baptized, what is the purpose of baptism. I invited the principal, The Rev. Dr. Francis Amaglo, to join us and be one of the judges for the debate.

On the day of the debate, family concerns and sickness caused only half of the class to be present. It was obvious the students remained perplexed and did not have a clear understanding of their assignment. Some were attempting to argue against their own defense. Some members of the teams were developing arguments against the majority of the team instead of molding a solidified team position. Each team also was not being consistent in its argument. The principal understood quickly the confusion and misunderstanding of the students. An academic exercise, such as this, was a new concept. What came about was an opportunity for further learning.

Using our differing backgrounds, the principal and I were able to assist the students in sharpening their understanding of what it means to be a team. We also helped the students understand that a team needs to be consistent in its own presentation. Dr. Amaglo, in particular, was able to help students understand the significance of such an exercise. In the end, hopefully, this will lead to not only more systematic thinking but also a deeper level of questioning. A new debate date was set. As the second debate began, we noticed immediately that the students were better prepared, united as a team, and sharper in their arguments. It was also obvious they were having more “fun” with the exercise and that they had given serious thought to their presentation.

Just as the exercise was a new learning experience for the students, so it was for me. I am a westerner. During the debate, questions arose which were not a part of my cultural thinking but for which the principal was well prepared. These questions had to do with the baptizing of children whose families are a part of “traditional” religious beliefs. (Might I add here in other classes I have learned more about polygamy and prophets in Ghanaian culture.) On this day, I learned about the practice of a Christian family member taking a niece or nephew from a “traditional” family to be baptized. Thinking about this caused me to consider Western society where a grandparent insists on a grandchild’s baptism even though the child’s parents have no intention on being a part of the church community. These are differing cultures and issues but surely related.

For me, this is part of the frustration and joy of the opportunity I have in teaching here in Ghana. I pray what I offer the students and what they teach me will assist both of us in our future ministries.

Peace,
Larry Colvin
Peki, Ghana