

My Thoughts on My Debate with Tony Jones

By Dan Jensen (2022)

The first thing I want to say is that this essay is not a full review of my debate with Tony Jones. That essay is now up on my website as “A Full Review of My Debate with Tony Jones.” The essay you are reading now is simply intended to document my initial thoughts on how the debate went from my perspective. This assessment is based on my experience in the debate itself, having watched the debate all the way through that night, and some things that have taken place after the debate.

Overall, I am pretty happy with how things went. Now I know that it is quite common for debaters to talk about all the ways he or she owned the opposing side post-debate, irrespective of how the debate actually went. I am not going to preach to the choir in this essay. Most of those on my side have not surprisingly been very positive, but I have also been given some very solid critique as well. For this, I am very grateful. And my pastor, Jason Wallace of Christ Presbyterian Church in the Salt Lake area, gave me the most honest and objective critique out of anyone in my circle. He has both engaged in many debates himself, and has also moderated many debates (including some well-known ones for James White). Hence, his assessment was very helpful to me. He gave me a B+, which I thought was very generous. I would probably give myself closer to a B-, and even then only because of the last three quarters of when Tony was crossing me.

I am not a natural formal debater and I knew that going into the debate. I am certainly no James White and never shall be. I have informally debated many, many people over the years, including many scholars. I have done this both in person and online. I am much more confident in these scenarios. And where I believe I am best at refuting the enemies of the faith is through my writing. I know my writings are not terribly popular or riveting, but for those who want a straightforward assessment of the facts, I believe I am

very capable in this area. I am also not a great public speaker for a number of reasons. I have been in ministry to one degree or another for around twenty years. My preaching has never received rave reviews. My teaching, on the other hand, has almost always been very well received. But even there, people have been honest with me over the fact that I speak too fast; I misspeak too much; I pause too often; and I use too many repetitive filler words and phrases (such as “uh;” “um;” “does that make sense[?];” and others).

For all of these reasons and more, I don't think I will be challenging too many more people to formally debate. If I am challenged, I may say yes because I don't want to be accused of hiding behind my writing. But it will depend on the person and the circumstances. The reason I challenged Tony and others is because I am convinced that there are two groups that repeatedly play fast and loose with the facts, and are rarely strongly challenged directly. These two groups are Progressive Christian leaders and internet Atheists. Therefore, I have challenged many of them to formally debate because so few others have done so. Now to be fair, in the last few years, this has been changing regarding the latter category and I am very happy to see this trend.

Because of my shortcomings, I knew I was probably going to lose on style points and that I would in all likelihood make many rookie mistakes. Both of those premonitions came to pass. I doubt he ever will see it, let alone review it, but if Nate Sala ever does an episode on our debate, I have no doubt he will tear me apart regarding many of my mistakes. And that is totally fine and fair. I never took debate in school or in college, and I am not a natural formal debater. I would probably agree with the vast majority of his critiques. Tony is a much better speaker than I am, and that definitely came across, especially regarding our opening statements. I am more than willing to concede this. I am also more than willing to concede that I made a lot of rookie mistakes (although for the reasons already stated, I'm not sure how much better I would do in a lot of these areas in future debates), mistakes that will be detailed below.

I have a tendency, when I get really riled up, to misspeak. And that was certainly the case in the debate, especially during my rebuttal. And even though I got him to admit some pretty key points in my cross, I did not pin him down the way I had hoped. Now, as I detail in my full review of the debate, he was very slick and disingenuous about his book (*Did God Kill Jesus?*) and that made things a lot harder for me. With that said, I admit that I did not do a great job in my cross overall. And the biggest mistake I made by far as far as the debate as a whole, is that I kept referring to my book (*A False Kind of Christianity*). I apologize to the audience if that was annoying, but it was exceedingly frustrating that he kept making gratuitous statement after gratuitous statement, giving his audience the impression that I have not already addressed these objections and arguments in-depth, which is patently false. But that is still no excuse, I should have just answered his questions. I also should not have harped so much on the fact that I do not believe he read my book. I want to be clear in saying that this is in fact my belief. I detail why this is the case in my full review of the debate. With that said, I do not know with dogmatic certainty if he did in fact read it or not. At one point in the debate, out of frustration, I made it sound like I did know with dogmatic certainty that he did not. I apologize for this and I have also apologized for this in my full review. I am not currently falsely accusing him of not reading my book. I am saying that I have good reasons for believing that he did not. And I stand by that. As I make clear in my full review though, even if he did read it, I don't think this makes him look any better.

Some have commented on the fact that it seemed odd that I closed out the debate. Some have also commented on the fact that even though it is probably true, I may not have wanted to say that I got the feeling he would not want to go to dinner with me. I only closed out the debate, instead of Paul (which was my preference as well as that of Paul), because Tony insisted on it because he said we could not add any more time to the debate. He repeatedly insisted in our correspondence that the debate could not be more than two hours. And I refused to take away any time from any of the other sections. And as far as the statement about the dinner, I made that based upon my experience with Progressive Christian leaders over the past almost fifteen years, and on the way Tony seemed so smug and angry throughout the debate (something many

people have commented upon to me). He got very angry with me after the debate regarding that very statement and I told him, "Ok then, let's go to dinner and talk things out. If we do so, I will publicly apologize for the statement on my website." That didn't appease him at all, and the next day he emailed me saying he was cutting off all ties with me, pretty much proving my point in that statement.

I had two primary goals for this debate going into it. The first was to try to reach those in the Progressive Christian movement who are on the fence. I do not believe I met this goal and I have honestly been pretty bummed about this ever since the debate. I think Tony was able to masterfully evade things in a way that will appeal to that audience. My second goal was to expose the extremely sloppy scholarship of Tony and the movement as a whole. I do believe I met this goal very strongly and this is the primary reason I said earlier at the beginning of this essay that I am overall happy with the final result of the debate. I did not have this goal due to any mean-spirited motives. I did not want to hurt or embarrass Tony simply for the sake of it. But the leaders in this movement often say things that are demonstrably false all the time, and they get away with it because their audience takes their word for things. Further, most of their audience has had very bad experiences with Traditional Evangelicalism or groups that claim to be Traditional Evangelical. Therefore, they have a vested interest in believing almost any critiques of our world. It was very important for me to call him and the movement out on this, and I believe I was very successful in this endeavor.

Scholars say things that are wrong all the time. But, most do so out of a lack of logic and consistency in their interpretations of the data. This is not always the case. Sometimes, they surprisingly say things that are contrary to the data. But, in these rare instances, they are usually getting something very wrong in an area outside of their field of expertise. Most Progressive Christian leaders are not scholars. But scholars in the movement routinely either plainly and blatantly misrepresent the data in areas where they clearly should know better, and/or they do not call out those who engage in this unethical scholarship. Tony is a prime example of one who for the most part falls in the former category, Enns is a prime example of one who for the most part falls into the

latter category. This reality had gone unchecked for far too long and I am very happy that I was able to bring some small semblance of correction here.

I understand that to those not thoroughly well-versed in theology, it may not seem like Tony was all that exposed. But I detail in my full review how badly Tony looked to anyone and everyone who is well-versed in theology. You might say, “Ok then, why aren’t all scholars Traditional Evangelicals?” Again, the vast majority of the debates that take place between scholars have to do with the interpretation of the data. I firmly believe that the best interpretation of all of the data overwhelmingly supports Traditional Evangelicalism. What is so frustrating about Tony and so many others in his movement, is that they don’t solely misinterpret the data, they regularly get the data very, very wrong.

I went into the debate with a fairly high view of Tony’s character. As I make clear in the preface to my book on his movement, my overall experience with those in his movement has been overwhelmingly negative. You may be tempted to say, “Well no surprise there! They are your spiritual enemies and so of course you are going to say bad things about them.” But as I make clear in the preface just mentioned, this isn’t the case at all. I have been witnessing to people from all walks of life for almost twenty years now, and the vast majority of my experiences have been positive. The one group I have witnessed to the most, next to Progressive Christians, are those in the LDS Church. And my experiences with them have been overwhelmingly positive. And while I made many mistakes in the debate, almost everyone has said that I came off as friendly and winsome throughout the debate, as I normally do in my interactions with people. Tony came off as self-righteous and angry. Many might be tempted to think that this was only because I went after him so sharply in my opening statement. This isn’t the case. Tony, despite being pretty cordial throughout our email correspondence leading up to the debate, was very grumpy before the debate when he joined us on the Zoom call. I said “hello” to him and he didn’t respond. He only half-heartedly exchanged pleasantries with Paul.

I knew Tony was very, very sloppy when it came to scholarly matters and that he needed to be called out for this. But I thought this was merely a flaw, and that he otherwise is an overall good guy. He seems like a good husband, father, and friend. And while he was often somewhat short and at times a little cocky in his emails to me, he was overall surprisingly cordial and patient with me (we ran into a lot of logistical issues early on because of Covid). Many brothers and sisters in Christ, including some big names in the fight against Progressive Christianity, asked me about his very public divorce and if those in his movement were being hypocritical by supporting him. I have no interest in getting into all the ugly details of his very public divorce, but I will say that in my research on him, it seemed like almost all of his biggest critics were only going off of the word of his ex-wife. On the flip side, it seemed like Tony provided extensive documentation for his version of the events. Therefore, I felt (and still do) that it seemed he was largely innocent regarding his divorce. And I articulated this to those who asked.

Therefore, I have been very disappointed by the way he acted in the debate, and after the debate as well. Tony was overtly hypocritical throughout the debate. He repeatedly called me out for *ad hominem*, at times becoming rather angry in his accusations. At one point, he even threatened to stop the debate. But, I at no point engaged in *ad hominem*. I simply called out his errors and his ignorance on certain points, which is entirely fair game, and I backed up these assertions. On the flip side, Tony engaged in actual *ad hominem* throughout the debate, something I thoroughly detail in my full review. And he clearly did not listen to my opening statement very carefully, that came across loud and clear in the debate. This only proves my point in the debate that he does not feel he even needs to deign to listen to our side. And this is one of the reasons I remain unconvinced that he actually read my book with any care. This is also thoroughly documented in my full review.

After the debate, Tony was incensed and proceeded to lecture me for about ten minutes. The next day he emailed me to say that he was cutting off all ties with me and would not be appearing on the Justin Brierley Podcast as scheduled. This had been set up in order to discuss and bring exposure to the debate. That was a huge blow as it is

now very difficult to bring exposure to the debate. There is no doubt in my mind that this is because Tony was very exposed in the last three quarters of his cross time to me. I admit that I got off to a rough start in that section with his question on whether or not I read Greek. This was a low blow question for reasons I detail in my full review. The question took me by surprise and that showed in the way I reacted to it. But, after that, I answered all of his questions easily and he looked positively terrible when it became clear that he has no idea what the *Textus Receptus* is. At no point in the debate was my assertion that he often gets the data very, very wrong more vindicated. I understand that to those not well-versed in theology, this might not have seemed like a very big deal. It may have seemed like he misspoke or something. But, I detail in my full review why there is no way that is the case and why that part of the debate is so significant.

To all those that have been supporting me through prayer and other means, I am so grateful and feel bad that I was unable to meet both of my goals in a more satisfactory fashion. I sincerely hope God was glorified through the debate and that He will use it mightily as He sees fit.