

The Welch-Russell Debate is the written form of a large debate conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1977. The two speakers were John A Welch and W. T. Russell with L. A. Stauffer and Kenneth W. Massey acting as their moderators respectively. Russell's affirmative argument was that "the scriptures teach that faith in Christ is the last condition of remission of sins of an alien sinner." Welch's was that "the scriptures teach that baptism in water is necessary for the remission of the sins of an alien sinner." Each speaker had 4 separate 30 minute sessions to speak. First the affirmative would speak then the fellow in the negative would reply to each 30 minute session.

Russell began the debate by appealing to several passages like Romans 2:12-16 to speak to the fact that works do not save us, but grace does. He conveniently skipped over verse 13 of Romans 2 which says "for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." Unfortunately for him his opponent Mr. Welch did not miss him skipping that verse either and spent a good bit of time in each of his 3 negative speeches asking Russell why he omitted that verse. Russell never answered his question nor did he acknowledge it. In addition to asking about Romans 2, Welch also asked Russell to explain his interpretation of James 2 and particularly verse 26 where the Spirit says that faith without works is dead. Russell didn't seem to have a good response to this as he essentially summed up by saying the word dead there cannot possibly mean dead, but more accurately means inactive. This doesn't hold up with the rest of the bible's usage of the word, as referenced by Welch, including Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead.

Welch, in trying to affirm that baptism is necessary for remission of sins, stood on Mark 16:16 as well as Acts 2:38 as the foundation of his argument. His appeal was that Russell instead of trying to explain those two passages would try to change the wording to fit what he wanted it to say. That was just about as accurate a description as I could imagine. Russell went to Greek language as well as some principles of the English language to say that the "for" in Acts 2:38 means "because of" not necessarily "for the purpose of." He spent nearly 2 30 minute sessions talking about this and not really addressing what the text says. He barely even acknowledged the first part of Mark 16:16 that says he who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but spent a lot of time on the latter portion that says he who does not believe will be condemned. Instead of attempting to harmonize the two thoughts he pinned them against each other. He did not gain much traction from a logical plain in my estimation.

Overall, Welch appeared to do a much better job of going to the scriptures to see what they had to say on these particular issues. Both of their propositions stated that the scriptures were where the information could be found to validate their claims so I would say Welch won the debate in my opinion. I'm not sure what the general opinion of the people in attendance was. There is no real way to quantify what kind of impact his handling of truth did for the people there in the audience, but he left a good impression on me as the reader and certainly gave me more ammunition to respond to false teaching.