

ACADEMY AWARD WINNERS

DENZEL
WASHINGTON
FOREST
WHITAKER

THE GREAT
DEBATERS

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY

THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY PRESENTS A HARPO FILMS PRODUCTION A DENZEL WASHINGTON FILM DENZEL WASHINGTON
FOREST WHITAKER "THE GREAT DEBATERS" WATE PARKER JORNEE SMOLLETT DENZEL WHITAKER JOHN HEARD AND KIMBERLY ELISE
CASTING BY DENISE CHAMMAN CSA EXEC PRODUCER MOLLY ALLEN MUSIC SUPERVISOR G. MARIO ROSWELL MUSIC COMPOSER BY JAMES NEWTON HOWARD AND PETER GOULD
COSTUME DESIGNER SHAREN DAVIS EDITOR HUGHES WINDORNE, A.C.E. PRODUCTION DESIGNER DAVID J. BOMBA DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY PHILIPPE ROUSSELOT A.C.S. / M.S.C.
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS BOB WEINSTEIN HARVEY WEINSTEIN DAVID CROCKETT PRODUCED BY TODD BLACK KATE FORTE OPRAH WINFREY JOE ROTH
STORY BY ROBERT EISELE & JEFFREY PORRO SCREENPLAY BY ROBERT EISELE DIRECTED BY DENZEL WASHINGTON

THE WEINSTEIN COMPANY HARPO FILMS THEGREATDEBATERSMOVIE.COM

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CHRISTMAS

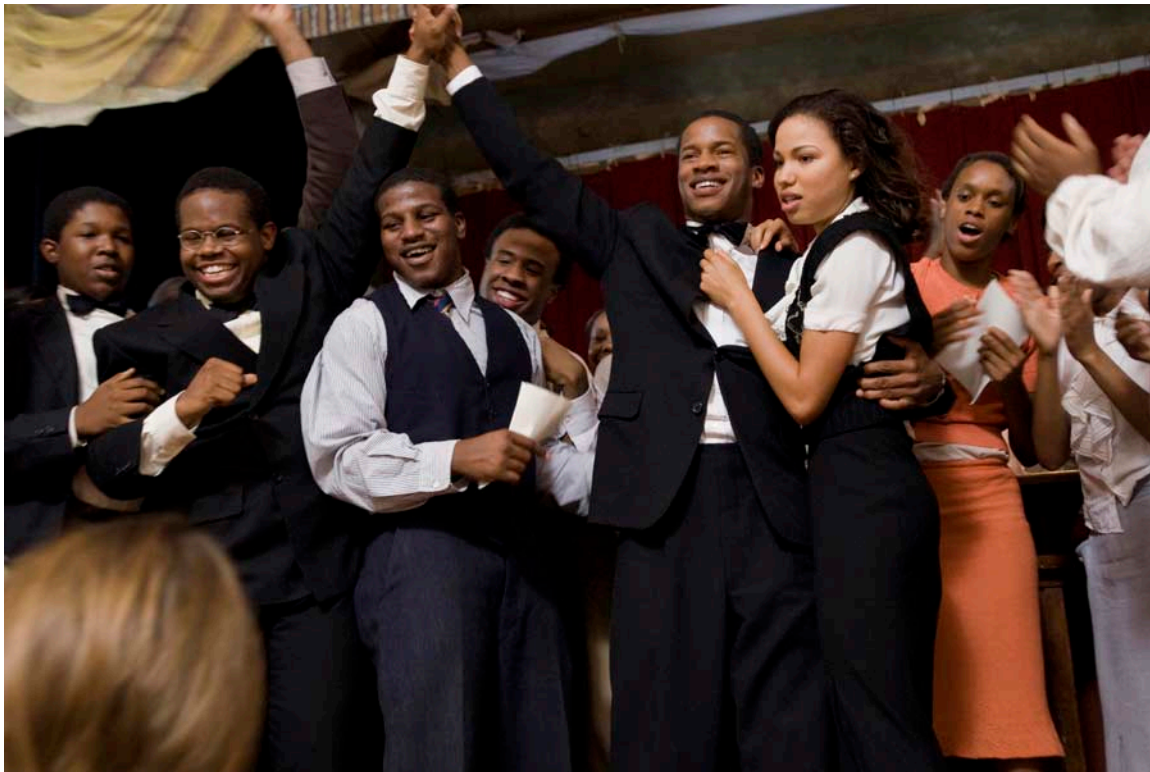
By Craig Detweiler, Ph.D.
The Brehm Center
Fuller Theological Seminary

INTRODUCTION

The Great Debaters is an inspiring story of courage, creativity, and resolve. It features stellar performances from Academy Award-winning actors like Denzel Washington and Forest Whitaker and rising talents like Jurnee Smollett. *The Great Debaters* celebrates the power of truthful words to overcome obstacles and set people free.

Debate begins with a resolution. It starts with a point to prove. It is a form of battle, fought with words. Denzel Washington directs *The Great Debaters* as a dance between opposing forces. On the affirmative side, stand the twin pillars of justice and righteousness. The opposition is fueled by ignorance and oppression. Who will win? The debate continues.

Denzel Washington portrays Melvin B. Tolson, a professor at Wiley College in Texas. In 1935, he leads the Wiley debate team towards an undefeated season and an opportunity to become the first black college to compete against renowned Harvard University. *The Great Debaters* demonstrates the power of education and the ability of truth to unlock opportunities. It also demonstrates the importance of mentors—teachers and parents who model maturity, confidence, and resolve. The next generation of students desperately needs role models who will nurture and disciple them--people like professor Melvin Tolson.



RESOLVED:

The education of our young people is the most important job in America.

“When I was a child I spoke as a child I understood as a child I thought as a child; but when I became a man I put away childish things.” 1 Corinthians 13:11

The Great Debaters begins with St. Paul’s poetic reflection on maturity. To follow Jesus, we must abandon childishness and put on the wisdom that accompanies adulthood. How do we help young people navigate that rite of passage? What forms of education can we invest in? What lessons do we still need to put into practice?

The movie opens with the insights of Dr. James Farmer (Forest Whitaker) one of the first black men to earn a Ph.D. He declares, “The most important job in America is the education of our young people.” Farmer tells an audience at Wiley College that, “There will be difficulties. But we must defeat them.” He challenges his listeners, “They must do what they have to do in order to do what they want to do.” *The Great Debaters* suggests, “Education is the only way out of ignorance and darkness into the glorious light.”



The *Great Debaters* celebrates teachers. Melvin Tolson creates an invigorating classroom atmosphere. He recites from the finest poets in the Harlem Renaissance, people like Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks. He dares students to tryout for the debate team, to step into ‘the hot spot’. Under Tolson’s tutelage, education becomes a lifelong test—more character formation than fact memorization.

The *Great Debaters* affirms those who invest in the next generation. It suggests that education remains a key to unlock unprecedented opportunities and essential maturity. It makes us wonder, “Who is teaching you? Who are you teaching?” Romans 13:9-10

DISCUSSION:

What teachers or mentors made a lasting impression upon your life?

What ‘childish’ ways do you need to ‘put away’ in order to follow God?

How can you invest in the education of the next generation?



RESOLVED:

The greatest weakness of humanity is doubt.

“Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, You of little faith, why did you doubt?”—Matthew 14:31

The Great Debaters is about young people growing



in confidence and capability. Melvin Tolson turns tentative students into fierce and seasoned debaters. His faith in their ability trumps their own self-doubt.

When we meet James Farmer, Jr., he appears overwhelmed by his surroundings. Joining the college debate team at age fourteen, James has a ways to go before his life experience catches up to his book knowledge. Will he make his esteemed father proud?

Henry Lowe has plenty of passion and charm, but seems to flee from conflict. He turns to a local juke joint whenever things fail to unfold as he hopes. Will he learn to handle his disappointment with something other than drinking?

Samantha Boone must overcome two challenges. As the only woman on the debate team, she is a minority. But she overcomes her doubt, learning to stand toe-to-toe with her opponents. As a black woman, she must argue, fight, and advocate for a seat on the bus, at the table, and throughout society. Melvin Tolson chooses these three unlikely heroes to serve as the Wiley College Debate Society of 1935-36. They form an unlikely power trio.

Under the direction of Melvin Tolson, the Great Debaters start seeing their potential one victory at a time. They learn to speak with clarity and confidence. They learn to assess their own limitations. Defeat becomes an opportunity to overcome new obstacles. When fears creep in, the Great Debaters learn to fight fear with faith.

Discussion:

In what situation have you doubted your ability? In what areas does doubt still have a hold on your life?

How can faith come alongside to conquer your fears?



RESOLVED:

The battle for the body begins with the mind.

Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. (Matt. 10:28)

Perhaps the most important lesson imparted by Tolson is the difference between our perceived enemies and our legitimate challenges. Tolson trains the Wiley Debate team to repeat a series of questions.

“Who is the judge? The judge is God because he decides who wins or loses. Not my opponent.”

“Who is my opponent? He doesn’t exist. He’s just a mere dissenting voice against the truth that I must speak.”

The Great Debaters demonstrates the importance of training your mind for battle. Young people need resolve in the face of opposition. They must learn to keep cool under pressure, even when wrongly or falsely accused.

Melvin Tolson anticipates the historical intimidation techniques of Willie Lynch to sharpen his students. Lynch had a reputation as the most ferocious slave owner in the West Indies, the origin of the term ‘lynching’. Tolson teaches his students that Lynch dominated his slaves through a simple formula, “Keep the body, take the mind.” The ability to kill a person’s soul, to rob them of hope or dignity, supercedes any torture or intimidation. Tolson charges his students to, “Find, take back and keep your righteous mind.”

Tolson and Farmer model the ability to ‘keep their cool’ amidst opposition. When the white sheriff arrests and holds Tolson without proof or cause, Farmer leads a group to the local jail. Yet, rather than engage in loud arguments, Farmer speaks quietly and confidently, with justice on his side. The minds of two sharp teachers overcome the intimidation of their enemies.



Discussion:

What battles take place in your mind?
When have you been tempted to lose your cool?
How might you “find, take back and keep your righteous mind”?



RESOLVED:

The time for justice, freedom and equality is always right now.

"But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."—Amos 5:24

The Great Debaters is set in Texas during the 1930s.

Racial injustice was an everyday fact of life. Yet, Melvin Tolson and his team oppose unjust laws with all manner of creativity. When he's not teaching students to debate, Tolson is rallying local farmers across racial lines.

The Great Debaters is an extended argument for freedom, equality, justice. It draws upon the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, upon role models like Amos and Jeremiah and Isaiah. Jesus continued that prophetic tradition with his radical defense of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. The Christian fight for justice continues on behalf of anyone who is oppressed.

The Wiley Debate team must put everything they've been taught into practice. They must overcome odds and win the judges confidence, even in a hostile environment. People question whether a black college team should be competing against an esteemed white university. When asked, "Are you supposed to be here?" The Great Debaters retort, "I guess we'll find out won't we?"

The young debaters confront one of the most horrific injustices—the evil specter of lynching. They must prove that civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice. The Great Debaters suggest, "We must never kneel before the tyranny of a majority." They draw upon the rich tradition of St. Augustine to declare, "An unjust law is no law at all."

Discussion:

What lessons about justice from history or the Bible do we need to remember?

What types of injustice have you seen in our world? How might you follow the example of Jesus and the biblical prophets in defending the oppressed and exploited today?

CONCLUSION

The lessons taught and modeled by Melvin Tolson transformed his young debaters. James Farmer, Jr. went on to found the Congress for Racial Equality. Samantha Booke joined the Freedom Riders in the 1960s. Melvin Tolson organized the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. And yet, Henry Lowe reportedly went on to the University of Southern California and became a minister but was never heard from again.

Not every student will remember what they've been taught. Jesus dealt with the rejection and betrayal of his closest disciple. But those students who learn their teachers' lessons, who put their faith into practice, can transform society.

The Great Debaters is a historical story that proves all too relevant even today. Lynching may be a thing of the past, yet nooses have recently made a tragic reappearance as a symbol of intimidation. The controversy surrounding the Jena Six stems from nooses hung in a tree outside, Jena (Louisiana) High School. But the incidents have not been limited to the South. Issues of race, power and intimidation are unfortunately, still quite timely.

So how should we respond to lessons of The Great Debaters? Will we resolve to offer the next generation a quality education? Will we build faith rather than doubt into our young people? The battle for our souls is often more mental than physical. How we think will affect how we live. Finally, the most important challenge for people of faith and conscience is to continue the prophetic ministry of Jesus. We must continue to serve the poor, the hungry and the hurting. But that also means reforming the structures and the systems that oppress people in America and abroad. We've made great strides since the 1930s. But the struggle is far from over. The time for freedom, justice and equality is always right now.

Craig Detweiler, Ph.D., founded an Urban Young Life program in his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina. He directs the Reel Spirituality Institute for Fuller Seminary's Brehm Center (HYPERLINK "<http://www.brehmcenter.org>") www.brehmcenter.org). His feature documentary, Purple State of Mind, will be touring American in 2008. Check out the trailer at: www.purplestateofmind.com.

STUDY NOTES: