

I Beg to Differ: Navigating Difficult Conversations with Truth and Love

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In today's polarized world, friends and strangers clash with each other over issues large and small. Coworkers have conflicts in the office. Married couples fight over finances. And online commentators demonize one another's political and religious perspectives. Is there any hope for restoring civil discourse?

Communications expert Tim Muehlhoff provides a strategy for having difficult conversations, helping us move from contentious debate to constructive dialogue.

How to Navigate Difficult Conversations

Why did you decide to write a book about having difficult conversations?

Tim: When I first started thinking about writing this book, a friend asked me why this topic? This is how I responded in an email:

"Starting a quarrel," suggests an ancient Proverb writer, "is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out" (Prov. 17:4). Can you relate? Have you ever started a conversation that ended badly? Heading in you hoped for the best, but feared the worst—only to have the worst happen. Discussing this particular topic with this person sparked defensiveness, anger and powerful emotions. The result? A breach occurred between the two of you and an argument broke out. In the wake of the conversation you are left with nagging questions: How can I remain faithful to my convictions but communicate in a way that produces dialogue, not debate? How can I balance truth and love when discussing difficult issues with people who disagree with me? And, what if the person I'm struggling with is a spouse, family member, coworker, or neighbor? The proverb admonishes me to drop the matter, not the relationship. *I Beg to Differ* will explore how to structure a conversation in a way that produces understanding, civility and understanding when engaging in difficult conversations about issues that matter most.

What is the central theme of *I Beg to Differ*?

Tim: The central theme is while people may not always agree with us, difficult conversations can still be marked by civility, truth and love. *I Beg to Differ* is more than a book about conflict; it is a book about *all* communication between those who differ on significant points. Though applicable to everyday encounters, its greatest value is that it demonstrates how we might make true advances with those who disagree with us *most*. *I Beg to Differ* introduces readers to a four-part communication strategy for the most difficult of conversations. The strategy centers on four essential questions that an individual must ask during a potentially difficult conversation with a spouse, son, or daughter, coworker, or neighbor. A communication strategy—gleaned from communication scholars and the wisdom of the Scriptures—that values dialogue over debate, acknowledging and entering into a person's story, cultivating common ground, acknowledging doubts and tailoring our communication to a particular person.

What makes your book unique to the topic of communication?

Tim: What makes my approach distinctive is that the final section includes scenarios in which the principles of the book are applied to real-life situations. How would a spouse talk about budget concerns without provoking the other? Can a Christian share Christ with a coworker of a different religious tradition without causing a rift in the workplace? How can a single mother confront her son about an overdependence on social media without it turning



Q & A



Tim Muehlhoff (PhD, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) is a professor of communication at Biola University in La Mirada, California where he teaches classes in family communication, interpersonal communication and gender. Tim is the coauthor of *The God Conversation: Using Stories and Illustrations to Explain Your Faith and Authentic Communication: Christian Speech Engaging Culture*. He and his wife, Noreen, are frequent speakers at FamilyLife Marriage Conferences, and Tim has served with Campus Crusade since 1986. They live in Brea, California, with their three boys.

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into a shouting match? Each scenario takes the principles and theory of the book and shows readers how to apply them.

The three scenarios were specifically selected to match my three target groups of readers. Those interested in (1) marital communication, (2) engaging others in evangelism/apologetics and (3) parenting.

What do you hope readers take away from *I Beg to Differ*?

Tim:

1. One of the significant problems of society is our careless handling and tossing about of words. We no longer respect the power of the spoken word. "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" argues the ancient Proverb writer (Prov. 18:21). In order to effectively negotiate a difficult conversation we must appreciate the ability of our words to confirm or disconfirm another. Language is like a loaded gun, notes linguist Dwight Bolinger: "It can be fired intentionally, but it can wound or kill just as surely when fired accidentally." When preparing to engage another we must anticipate the impact our words could have on another (what communication theorists call "feedforward").
2. Learning to monitor and regulate our self-talk is vital in managing the powerful emotions associated with difficult topics and people. To gain a full understanding of how to engage others includes learning to uncover and recognize the emotional triggers that influence how we perceive and frame communicative situations.
3. Paul argues that each of us, regardless of whom we are engaging, should speak "the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). Even when insulted, we are not to respond in kind, but rather, give a blessing (Rom. 12:14). Such commands not only seem wildly counterintuitive, but unrealistic. Am I to offer love and a blessing to angry or caustic individuals? Many of us are experts at delivering content, but struggle to present it in a consistently loving manner. As individuals intent on obeying the commands of Scripture, we must prepare to engage others by utilizing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, solitude, meditation, thanksgiving, and peacemaking.
4. Proverbs 18:13 states that "to answer before listening—that is folly and shame." Why is listening so crucial? To neglect it is to respond to a person in folly (speaking out of ignorance without all the facts) or shame (treating the person as an inferior). Rather than talking prematurely, the wise conversationalist "stores up knowledge" (Prov. 10:1). Before we respond to a person it is crucial we find out exactly what he or she believes.
5. The greatest skill needed when discussing difficult topics is not the ability to debate, but the ability to affirm. In the midst of an intense conversation differences will be apparent; it will take skill to cultivate common ground. For many of us, forging common ground makes

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"A number of years ago I determined two very important things about marriage: we are naturally very good at initiating conflict, and we are naturally very bad at resolving conflict. How you resolve conflict in your marriage, family and relationships will determine the depth of intimacy you experience in these relationships. I Beg to Differ is '911 to the rescue' for relationships. This may be the most important book you read this year."

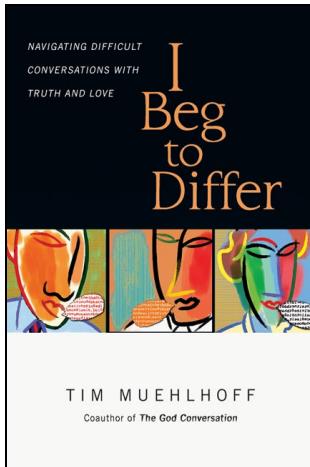
—Dennis Rainey,
host, *FamilyLife Today*,
founder and president,
FamilyLife Ministries

us nervous because we equate common ground with compromise. Not so. Cultivating common ground is the skill of affirming similar interests, desires, goals, or priorities, not necessarily similar conclusions.

6. In our zeal to share our own perspective we forget that communication is a give and take proposition—a right to be earned. If we want those who disagree with us to listen to *our* story, then we must listen to theirs. If we want others to attend to *our* convictions then we must first attend to theirs. If we desire for others to cultivate common ground with us, we must do so *first*.



BOOK EXCERPT



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Do you know the power of your words?

In a technologically driven culture, the sheer volume of words being communicated can cause us to forget their power. Facebook has more than a billion active users worldwide and is available in more than seventy languages. If Facebook were a country it would be the third largest in the world, lagging only behind China and India. Today users on Twitter are sending more than two hundred million Tweets per day, or 2,315 per second. YouTube reports that more than four billion videos are uploaded each month and that in 2011 it had more than one trillion views, or about 140 views for every person on earth. Internet communication produces enough information to fill seven million DVDs every hour, with annual consumption predictions for 2015 at 966 exabytes. To put this in perspective, a study by University of California Berkeley estimates that if all the words spoken by human beings were put into text form, they would take up merely five exabytes.

A significant problem of modern society is its careless handling and tossing about of words. So how can we go about reclaiming respect for their power? In order to effectively negotiate a difficult conversation we must appreciate the ability of words to deeply confirm or disconfirm another person. Language is like a loaded gun, notes linguist Dwight Bolinger—it can be fired intentionally, but it can wound or kill just as surely when fired accidentally.

The first step in crafting a difficult conversation is to reclaim a healthy respect for the power of words. When preparing to engage another individual in a challenging conversation, we must acknowledge and anticipate the impact our words could have. As Christian communicators, we must particularly embrace how seriously God takes human language.

— Adapted from chapter one, “Reclaiming the Power of Words”