



Q & A



Winsome Conviction *Disagreeing Without Dividing the Church*

December 8, 2020 | \$17, 224 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4799-0

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, persuasion, and gender. He is the author of *I Beg to Differ* and *Defending Your Marriage* and the coauthor of *The God Conversation*, *Authentic Communication*, and *Winsome Persuasion*, which received a 2018 *Christianity Today* book award in Apologetics/Evangelism. Visit TimMuehlhoff.com and follow him on twitter: @DrMuehlhoff.

How Could You Possibly Believe That?!

How did the current cultural and political climate influence your decision to write *Winsome Conviction*?

Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer: Exchanges like this motivated us to write the book:

“Finally, someone said what we are all thinking! He’s got to go!” and “What we are all thinking?” you reply. “He’s doing a lot of good and the article is a joke!”

You look at each other in the church parking lot and realize you have dramatically different takes on the op-ed piece everyone is talking about. The essay, written by *Christianity Today* editor Mark Galli is titled, “Trump Should Be Removed from Office.” Galli argues that the President has abused his power for personal gain in an attempt to smear a political rival and should be impeached! He concludes by asking if sincere Christians can honestly continue to assert that “the bent and broken character of our nation’s leader doesn’t really matter in the end?”

“So, we just forget all the President has done!” you say as the volume increases. “It doesn’t matter that he’s placed conservatives on the Supreme Court, is pro-life, and protected your religious liberty?”

Two car doors slam as the conversation ends abruptly.

The frustration and differing opinions mirror that of Christians nationwide. After the essay appeared subscriptions to *Christianity Today* increased, while two hundred evangelical leaders publicly slammed the op-ed claiming it “questioned the spiritual integrity of Christians.”

While your disagreement with a person sitting in the pew in front of you, or a Christian colleague at an organization or school may not concern something as dramatic as impeaching a president, we all know what it’s like to be angry and disappointed with a fellow believer. This anger may be fostered by how a person voted, what theological beliefs he or she has, or the laissez-faire attitude some adopt to a pandemic. Anger and disbelief mingle: How could you possibly believe that!?

In what ways have you been involved in moderating these kinds of disagreements?

Tim and Richard: We have moderated meetings between groups that have become entrenched and no longer see any commonality. In fact, the groups see each other as a threat to the church or organization itself. This past year we have created at Biola University a campus-wide series called, Faculty Duo-louges.



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Richard Langer (PhD, University of California, Riverside) is professor of biblical and theological studies at Talbot School of Theology and director of the Office for the Integration of Faith and Learning at Biola University. Specializing in the areas of theological integration, moral philosophy, bioethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of religion, he has also taught at Trinity International University and the University of California. Langer has contributed articles to publications such as the *Journal of Spiritual Formation* and *Soul Care*,

These dialogues are designed to help groups engage each other in civil, compassionate, and productive ways. Our experience has resulted in a unique approach to helping groups uncover negative assumptions about each other, learn to listen in a non-threatening environment, find common ground, and achieve what we call authentic disagreement.

What is the hot button that you tackle in this book?

Tim and Richard: The only thing more difficult than discussing Christian convictions in the public square is discussing them with fellow believers in the church. This may seem counterintuitive, but it is true. We may have more disagreements with nonbelievers, but our disagreements with fellow believers are more problematic and more emotionally charged.

Outside the Christian community, one anticipates having biblical convictions contested, mocked, or even despised. Disagreement is unpleasant but expected. We know our beliefs about Christ and morality are not broadly shared in the American public square. Therefore, we expect conflict and are equipped for it, or at the very least we know we should be. When our personal convictions are contested by fellow church members everything changes. We feel attacked from behind. It feels both unexpected and wrong! We assume our biblical convictions will be shared by those sitting on our right and left in Christian church. If they doubt or deny our convictions, we don't experience it as a mere difference of opinion, but rather as a violation of an unspoken agreement. We are not merely intellectually challenged by a new idea or puzzled by a different viewpoint. We are hurt and offended.

What are some key points you hope readers take away from *Winsome Conviction*?

Tim and Richard:

- Although it may sound counterintuitive, it is actually harder to negotiate conflicting convictions within the church than it is to negotiate conflicting convictions between the church and secular culture.
- One of the greatest existential threats to the New Testament church was quarreling. Almost every New Testament epistle has quarreling either in the foreground or the background. One of the most thorough discussions of quarreling is found in Romans 14. Here we discover that we must distinguish between absolutes, preferences, and personal convictions.
- When convictions conflict, we need to be patient enough to tell and hear the story of how our convictions from our shared confessional beliefs.
- All of us know what it feels like to experience conflict within an organization, university, or church. People we once felt close to now seem distant and even angry. Individuals we used to be excited to see are viewed with suspicion. What most of us don't understand is how the conflict started and gained such momentum.
- To be effective, leaders must focus on both structure (specific goals of a meeting, clear agenda to accomplish goals, identify gatekeepers of agenda) and interaction (make one point at a time, maintain civility, support ideas with evidence, listen actively, foster common ground). Creating a checklist of structural and interactive goals is a prerequisite for a productive meeting and dialogue.



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