

“Our world is filled with the noise of competing voices shouting about topics that make many Christians uncomfortable: sex addiction and pornography, suicide, gender-confusion, divorce, politics . . . the list goes on. *Challenging Conversations* will equip you to speak clearly and confidently about God’s perspective on these issues in a way that honors him and opens doors.”

**Jim Daly**, president, Focus on the Family

“Are you afraid or unprepared to talk about taboo topics in the church—topics that affect people dramatically? Jason Jimenez shows you how to minister to people biblically on divorce, sex, homosexuality, racism, pornography, abortion, politics, and more. I don’t know of any other book that covers so many important current issues in such a practical way.”

**Dr. Frank Turek**, founder of *Crossexamined.org* and coauthor of *I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*

“Could it be possible that having challenging conversations instead of avoiding them is actually *good* for the church, not bad? Could such conversations, if done differently, bring God-pleasing unity rather than division? Could the secret to having such conversations be to care more and not less about the topics so many Christians fear? Jason Jimenez thinks the answer to each of these questions is YES, and after reading both the why and the how in this book, I bet you will agree.”

**John Stonestreet**, president, Colson Center for Christian Worldview, and coauthor of *A Practical Guide to Culture*

“Say goodbye to both culture-war aggression and conflict avoidance. Jason Jimenez shows how to love others while still loving the truth—even when it comes to the tough topics that baffle Christians today. The timing of this book for the church, and for our society, could not be better.”

**Jeff Myers**, PhD, president, Summit Ministries

“Somehow in American Christianity it has become Christlike to “live and let live” and never rock the boat or spark iron-sharpening-iron conversations in any way. But those days are over, and challenging conversations have come back into play. In this amazing book, written by our good friend Jason Jimenez, Christians can once again be equipped to speak the truth in love and have those conversations that are so desperately needed today.”

**David and Jason Benham**, bestselling authors of *Whatever the Cost* and nationally acclaimed entrepreneurs

“Do you want to get better at leading your children and others to truth rather than hitting them over the head with Scripture until they cry “uncle!”? Good! This book will help. Jason’s three tactics—relate, investigate, and translate—will help you advocate for truth in ways that keep conversations going. I’ve already used these to better frame opportunities I’ve had to listen, learn, and influence others—and they work. So do Jason’s suggestions to end discussions well. You’ll love his three questions that honor everyone. They make follow-up more realistic and effective so that discussions do become ongoing conversations. His examples will help you implement the ideas successfully. You can have true give-and-take, listen-and-learn conversations and not one-and-done discussions. Your children will more willingly admit they’re confused and be more open to your ideas. This increases your power!”

**Kathy Koch**, PhD, founder and president, Celebrate Kids, Inc.; cofounder, Ignite the Family; and author of *Five to Thrive: How to Determine If Your Core Needs Are Being Met (and What to Do When They’re Not)*

“My friend Jason Jimenez gets what is lost on so many Christian leaders today: you can’t dodge tough issues. You must engage them or become irrelevant. And Jason does engage them, with persuasive content *and* an artful method. Get this book and master it. You’ll learn Jason’s knack for asking great questions that invite listeners to consider if maybe, just maybe, the Christian worldview has something to say about the toughest issues of our day.”

**Scott Klusendorf**, president, Life Training Institute

“Jason Jimenez knows of what he speaks. He has worked with teens and families for many years, walking with them through good times and bad. His book *Challenging Conversations* distills that experience into wisdom. The questions he answers are the ones our cynical, skeptical, and secular friends and family members are asking. His answers are short, sharp, and compassionate. This is a book we need.”

**Warren Cole Smith**, president, MinistryWatch, and coauthor of *Restoring All Things: God’s Audacious Plan to Change the World through Everyday People*

Perspectives: A Summit Ministries Series



# CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

A Practical Guide to Discuss  
Controversial Topics in the Church

**JASON JIMENEZ**



**BakerBooks**

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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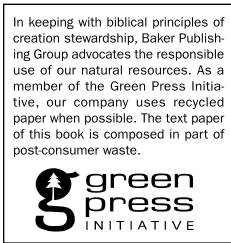
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I dedicate this book to two dear friends  
who have long inspired me to serve our Lord  
and be a champion of the faith.

*Norm Geisler (1932–2019)*

You shaped my worldview, loved me as a son,  
and taught me how to live for Christ.  
I am forever grateful to God for our friendship  
and can't wait until we are reunited in heaven.  
I miss you dearly!

*David Florian*

Your faithful prayers and generosity  
have bestowed on me the privilege  
to teach, write, and minister to families.  
Your friendship has been a gift  
that propels me forward.

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# Introduction

## The Struggle to Communicate

To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Titus 1:15–16

**A**s Alan and Justin walked out of their Wednesday night group, Alan could tell something was bothering Justin. In the few years they'd known each other, Justin had been known to ruffle a few feathers at church. Tonight was no exception. In frustration, Justin spoke up. "Alan, I know you think same-sex marriage is wrong. But times have changed. The church needs to be less self-righteous and more inclusive. I have a lot of gay friends who love God and want to be accepted for who they are. Why can't you and our church group see that?" Alan was at a loss for words.

There is a growing divide among Christians who don't see eye to eye regarding mental illness, gender identity and equality, abortion, politics, and much more. Yet even though they disagree on

an interpretation of Scripture, they are sidestepping challenging conversations.

In my years of ministry, I've observed that when Christians speak their minds, they don't necessarily do so to carry on a conversation. Once they give their opinion, that's it. They don't care if other people agree or disagree. It's their opinion, and they believe they're right. Any opposition or push back leads only to defensiveness and friction.

There should be a balance. Christians shouldn't just come right out and say whatever is on their minds. Neither is it wise to beat around the bush.

With all the anxieties and perplexities that we wrestle with regularly, it's no wonder we have such a hard time opening up about controversial matters. For far too long, we have allowed too many excuses and ineffective methods of communicating to turn us away from one another.

“I never know what to say.”

“What if I embarrass myself?”

“I don't like it when people are mad at me.”

“I don't want to argue.”

“I don't like the way it feels when there's tension between us.”

“That's just your opinion/interpretation.”

“You need to be less judgmental and more open-minded.”

But it doesn't matter what you or I think. What matters is what God has said in his Word. The fact that you are a Christian doesn't mean that everything you believe to be correct matches the truth of God. God's truth stands regardless of how much we believe something to be right. Moreover, just because you and I might disagree on a moral issue, that doesn't make us mortal enemies.

We can't expect to grow in our faith and our relationships unless we face this tension and learn to communicate effectively. We need to move away from rehashing things in our minds and start

hashing out critical issues with one another to regain some clarity and—hopefully—unity as well.

## A Necessary Evil

Challenging conversations are a way of life. Think of them as a necessary evil. You may not like them, but sometimes you must face them if you are going to get to the truth.

Or you can keep telling yourself that if you have that challenging conversation with that person in your small group, things will be too awkward afterward.

But how will you know unless you try?

You see, my friend, we tell ourselves these lies out of fear. Fear to disagree. Fear to offend. Fear of rejection. We get so worked up about what might happen that we avoid having any heart-to-heart conversations. In his classic book on communication, *The Miracle of Dialogue*, Reuel Howe sheds light on the power communication plays in relationships.

Every man is a potential adversary, even those whom we love. Only through dialogue are we saved from this enmity toward one another. Dialogue is to love, what blood is to the body. When the flow of blood stops, the body dies. When dialogue stops, love dies and resentment and hate are born. But dialogue can restore a dead relationship. Indeed, this is the miracle of dialogue: it can bring relationship into being, and it can bring into being once again a relationship that has died.<sup>1</sup>

We, members of the church, need to be willing to jump into difficult conversations, to fight alongside one another in the trenches and not be so entrenched in our views that we stop fellowshiping with one another. We may reject a person's stance, but we are not called by God to reject the person. We may be disinterested in having a close relationship with them, but that doesn't give us the right not to be interested in their spiritual walk with God.

I have several friends I love dearly, even though they hold opposing views on several theological and moral issues. There have been many times when we've been embroiled in a heated discussion and I've felt a bit agitated with them, yet I am constantly reminded by the Holy Spirit to remain respectful and cordial with them.

Sarah Bessey is someone I disagree with on several theological issues, but I do admire her willingness to engage in heated matters. In her book *Jesus Feminist*, she says something that I believe is fitting to mention: "We have often treated our communities like a minefield, acted like theology is a war, we are the wounded, and we are the wounding."<sup>2</sup> This is a great way to describe how we often move about the landscape of the church. We act like there are minefields all around us, afraid that if we take one small step in the wrong direction of a conversation, it will explode and cause some serious damage.

This paranoia has brought out two extremes: avoidance and arguments. If we don't want to argue, we say to ourselves, "I'll just sit quietly and not stir the pot of controversy."

However, it's good to have open debates with other Christians. People should be able to speak their minds and get to the heart of important matters. Even the Scottish atheist David Hume rightly assumed, "Truth springs from argument amongst friends."

There are many instances in the New Testament where we see Christians working through their differences. In 1 Corinthians 8, the question before the church was, Is it lawful to eat animals sacrificed to idols? Some Corinthians felt it was permissible to eat the meat, while others said it was not. The main issue for the apostle Paul was explaining to the Corinthians that their actions should not offend the conscience of a less mature Christian (vv. 7–13).

In Romans 14:1, Paul makes it clear that we should not "quarrel over opinions" as we debate matters. So it is possible to have a cordial disagreement with someone and still love and care for them as a human being without being divisive. Just because someone is naive on a particular topic, that doesn't mean our love for them



needs to be restricted. Demonstrating unconditional love is the mature approach to any given situation.

Think of having a disagreement with a Christian friend as more like a baseball game than a boxing match. There will be swinging, but not at each other. The objective is to critique their point of view, not criticize them as a person. The two of you can still praise the Lord together despite holding different opinions on disputable matters. You may not fully agree with their point of view, but that doesn't mean you can't agree on the central points of the gospel.

We can't keep allowing feuds to divide us just because we are unable to handle moral disputes. Not agreeing needs to be something we embrace, not something we attempt to erase from the church. Proverbs 15:31 says, "If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the wise" (NLT).

My friend, we are not only to hear one another out but also to love one another and strive for deep fellowship even in our differences and disagreements (Col. 3:12–15). If all we care about is making our point, then our disputes will never be resolved. No doubt there will be a difference of opinions. We just have to make sure that our views are expressed in humility (James 4:10). As Ravi Zacharias was fond of saying, "Even with differences, we ought never to lose the dignity of the other person."

A figure who exemplified this needs no introduction. His name is Billy Graham (1918–2018). Luis Palau was privileged not only to travel with and speak alongside the great evangelist but also to call him a dear friend. So if there was one person who saw the ins and outs of Billy, it was Luis. Listen to how he describes his friend:

After televangelist Jim Bakker had his meteoric fall from grace and went to prison for fraud, I hear that he was assigned toilet-cleaning duty on Christmas morning. While in the thick of the job, a voice came across the intercom: "Jim Bakker, visitor!" It was Billy Graham. Jim, fresh out of toilet duty, went to see his visitor and says simply that Billy threw his arms around Jim and

said, “Jim, I love you.” Billy had every reason to think that visit was beneath him. Yet he went straight to the source of the mess and embraced it, just like Jesus. Billy genuinely loved people, and he did not judge them. I believe that’s what made him one of the most remarkable witnesses for the Good News in history. Was he flawed? Yes, of course, as we all are. Do I fall down and worship him as some kind of hero? Not in the least. But he was and remains an inspiration.<sup>3</sup>

Like Billy, are you willing to do things you think are beneath you? Are you ready to go to the people inside and outside your church and meet them in their mess?

It would have been easy for Billy to jump to conclusions concerning the terrible things Jim Bakker did. Yet instead, Billy visited Jim in prison—extending an olive branch and opening the door to let healing into the Christian community. Not only did doing so take courage, but it was also a show of great humility.

Unfortunately, many Christians are ineffective when addressing controversial matters that are upsetting their lives and breaking up community among Christians.

Before I provide an overview of how *Challenging Conversations* can help you navigate controversial topics, we will examine the moral decline in the American church, which has in fact led to many of the controversies.

## Moral Decline in the Church

The moral decline in the church can be divided into three categories:

1. *The weakening of theology.* Many within the church have been secularized and believe the Bible is too dogmatic. Objectivity is oppressive.
2. *The breaking away from consecration.* Many within the church view morality as adaptable to one’s predilections. Holiness is optional, not a priority.

3. *The worshiping of self.* Many within the church feed on worldliness disguised as Christian living. Sin is subjective.

As more evangelical Christians embraced moral relativism and engaged in immoral behavior, the church attempted to shelter itself from the public debauchery. Yet their actions, which were meant for the good of the church, had dire consequences.

The church's moral decline has resulted in a loss of Christianity's influence in the culture, because most Christians have come to accept that the church has no business taking up cultural matters in the public square.<sup>4</sup>

Another dire consequence can be spotted in the pulpit. Many pastors would rather stay neutral and avoid controversial matters than speak the truth. David F. Wells, in his book *God in the Wasteland*, paints the picture of what doctrinal compromise has done to the church: "It is now considered better to look good than to be good. The façade is more important than the substance—and, that being the case, the substance has largely disappeared. In the center there is now only an emptiness."<sup>5</sup>

A lack of teaching theology not only has contributed to the decline in biblical literacy among churchgoers but also has created an absence of godliness within the church. Too much stock is placed on human experience as the means to propel us spiritually forward. Rather than grow the church, theological compromise has done the opposite. Glenn Stanton doesn't mince words: "Churches that throw biblical truth overboard find their members jumping overboard after it."<sup>6</sup> And that's precisely what is happening in churches across the United States.

Another thing that I believe has played a big factor in the moral decline in the church is our inability to face challenging conversations with forethought and resolve. This is something I ran past John Stonestreet, president of the Colson Center, and he agreed, saying, "We have privatized morality for so long that none of us are willing to look our friends in the eye and say they are wrong."

The American church is filled with halfhearted believers who don't have the appetite to be corrected or the stomach to confront those who hold beliefs that run contrary to the clear teachings of the Bible. Steven Pressfield, the bestselling author of *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *Gates of Fire*, was asked by Timothy Ferriss to share some concerns he has seen in his profession. In response, Pressfield expressed his disappointment in how so many people are not willing to do the hard work. He said, "The disease of our times is that we live on the surface. We're like the Platte River, a mile wide and an inch deep."<sup>7</sup> Now, I realize that Pressfield wasn't referring to Christians when he said this, but I do believe that his sentiment describes a large number of Christians in the twenty-first century.

### **Conversant on Controversial Topics**

Which brings me to the purpose of this book: to help you learn how to communicate effectively with a fellow Christian when a controversial topic arises. I want you to be able to create an open space to have intellectual discourse that honors the Lord. And as you do, others just like you will rise and do the same.

*Challenging Conversations* isn't going to teach you the art of being right. It's going to help you say and do the right thing amid difficult conversations with other Christians. It will help you develop the art of conversing with people you might not see eye to eye with. I like what my friend, a licensed professional counselor and therapist, once said to me: "Christians need to have more healing conversations." That's what I want to help you do.

I'm sure you've read plenty of gimmicky books that delivered very little on their promises. You won't get that in this book. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach when having a challenging conversation with someone who adamantly disagrees with you. Everyone's journey and dialogue regarding a wide range of hot topics will look and sound different. Some moral issues and controversial topics will speak more directly to you than to someone else. But

what I will promise you is that if you open your mind intellectually and seek to implement the proven tactics in *Challenging Conversations*, you will see a significant change in the way you formulate your position on some issues.

Each controversial topic covered in this book is tremendously important. Each chapter will give you a better understanding of the moral stigma and problems surrounding it and will offer specific methods to help you converse with someone in the church who holds a viewpoint different from your own.

In chapter 1, you will learn the three highly effective tactics of a conversant Christian that you can use when faced with a challenging conversation.

Chapter 2 explores the various complexities and levels of depression and mental illness and clears up the misconception that Christians can't be diagnosed with depression. The chapter deals up front with the troubling rise in the number of suicides and offers hope to the millions suffering from anxiety, depression, and mental illness.

Chapter 3 dives into the substance abuse plaguing the church and attempts to answer the hotly debated question, *Is addiction a disease or a choice?* The chapter also details what true recovery looks like and offers ways to meet people in their pain and to help them find forgiveness and freedom in Christ.

Chapter 4 confronts the sexual bondage of pornography and examines the number of churchgoing people consumed by its addiction. Given the widespread use of pornography and the guilt and shame associated with it, this chapter explains ways to speak the truth in love to those affected by it.

Chapter 5 takes an honest look at the number of Christians who are having sex outside of marriage and why they believe doing so isn't wrong. Through the clear teaching of God's Word, this chapter challenges this false belief and seeks to embolden Christians to persevere through the temptations and remain sexually pure before a holy God.

Chapter 6 defines a biblical marriage, examines several delicate situations that constitute reasons for divorce and remarriage, and prepares you to adequately reason from the Scriptures.

Chapter 7 addresses the growing confusion and tension among Christians about sexuality and gender identity, touches on a few of the complex issues and struggles faced in the LGBT community, and examines how to engage the subject of sexuality and gender identity with compassion and without compromise.

Chapter 8 simplifies the abortion debate by unmasking the mendacious history of *Roe v. Wade*, lays out a compelling case for the right to life of the unborn, presents fact-based responses to the top abortion arguments espoused in the culture, and identifies a course of action that will reduce the advancing tolerance of abortion in the church.

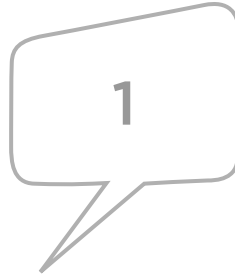
Chapter 9 presents four biblical principles that will help Christians of different political views find common ground without becoming argumentative or judgmental.

Chapter 10 recognizes the racial divide present in the church and seeks to bring about racial reconciliation among Christians and to restore many relationships discarded due to racism and segregation.

As you improve your communication skills, never lose sight of cultivating a deeper love and respect for those with whom you may not see eye to eye within the Christian community. My hope for you, my friend, is that *Challenging Conversations* will embolden you to be a bright light of truth and love in your church, and that as God's truth transforms you, you will likewise affect change in the lives of those around you.<sup>8</sup>

Jason Jimenez

2 Timothy 4:1–2



## The Three Highly Effective Tactics of a Conversant Christian

Let a righteous man strike me—that is a kindness;  
let him rebuke me—that is oil on my head.  
My head will not refuse it.

Psalm 141:5 NIV

**M**ost Christians are better at avoiding an issue than they are at confronting one. The very thought of saying something that might hurt someone's feelings sends quivers down our spines. And so rather than jeopardize unity, we reserve our comments and take a backseat.

But if we think about it, does avoiding challenging conversations contribute to the unity of the church? It does not. Yet this is the go-to response of most Christians. If someone says something that we believe flies in the face of Christianity, our modus operandi is to say nothing. But not saying something is saying something. It communicates that we don't care or that we are too afraid to stand up for God's truth.

A few years ago, I had lunch with a good friend of mine. The two of us have had many memorable meals together, but this one hit me in a way I will never forget. It wasn't the food or the atmosphere in the restaurant that I will always remember. It was what my friend said.

During our conversation, I could sense weariness in my friend, and he could sense it in me too. Because we are both in ministry, we try to avoid sounding like Debbie Downers and make an effort to end our conversations on a high note. I mused over possibilities to digress into a more soothing discussion, but before I could say anything, he said something that made this lunch unforgettable.

“Jason,” my friend said with a sense of bleakness in his voice, “if Christians are too uncomfortable to deal with controversial matters, then they will suffer in silence. And think what that will do to the church in the next ten or twenty years.”

### **Three Fat Excuses**

I have had a lot of time to reflect on what my friend said that day. It forced me to look within my heart and come to grips with my own unwillingness to have difficult conversations with people in my life.

After that lunch, I began gathering the top reasons why Christians avoid addressing controversial topics with people they don't see eye to eye with. What I found is that their avoidance typically boils down to these three excuses: ignorance, defensiveness, and discomfort.

#### *Excuse #1: I'm Just Not That Smart*

The first common excuse I hear from Christians regarding their avoidance of challenging conversations is that they aren't any good at having substantive conversations: “I never know what to say,” “I'm not sophisticated enough,” “I'm not smart enough,” “I get tongue-tied.”



Perhaps this is an excuse you use. But the fact that you are reading this book is a great sign. Still, reading isn't enough; you have to be willing to change. The late Stephen R. Covey, the author of the popular book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, was a firm believer that if a person truly wanted to change their life, they needed to start by changing the way they think. The Bible has a lot to say about this. In Romans 12:2, Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." In Philippians 4:8, Paul says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

A big chunk of your ineffectiveness is *thinking* you aren't effective. If you have a negative mindset, then you need to spend more time meditating on what the Bible says and praying that you will stop thinking negatively and start thinking positively.

I admit that I am not a person naturally gifted in the area of persuasion. I have dyslexia. But I have found that with hard work and determination, anyone can gain the skills necessary to become a conversant Christian.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, if I can master these skills, so can you.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC), referred to as "the man who knew everything," wrote about the three aspects of "the rhetorical triangle." He called them *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*. *Ethos* speaks to the gut. Are you trustworthy? *Logos* speaks to the mind. Are you making any sense? *Pathos* speaks to the heart of the person. Are you getting anywhere?

So ask yourself, "Do people trust what I say (*ethos*)? Do my arguments make sense (*logos*)? Do I move people when I speak (*pathos*)?"<sup>2</sup> It would be to your advantage to take the one aspect that comes most naturally to you and build on it in your daily life.

**Rhetoric:** The art of effective persuasion, whether in speech or writing. Rhetoric is not just about getting your point across. It's about being both insightful and influential in what you say and how you act.

**Famous rhetoricians:** Cicero, John Adams, Daniel Webster, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., Jordan Peterson, and Jay Heinrichs

*Excuse #2: I Get Too Defensive*

The second excuse people use to avoid challenging conversations is that they get defensive and too worked up. A Christian leader once told me how he was struggling to keep it together when people in his church disagreed with him theologically. He got so worked up that he was contemplating whether to resign.

If you happen to be a person who gets defensive, I'd like for you to consider something. Do you think it's appropriate to get defensive over matters related to the Christian faith?

Of course not.

You never read about Jesus silencing his disciples every time they spoke their minds. He never belittled or berated anyone he came in contact with. Jesus encountered many people with different views, but no matter the difficulty or the subject matter, Jesus, while unwavering in his beliefs, never wavered in his calling to speak the truth in love.

No doubt, we can let our emotions get the best of us sometimes. But that is no excuse for neglecting our duty to engage with others regarding controversial topics. The real issue behind defensiveness is pride. Perhaps it is causing you to become impatient with people and to judge with contempt those who do not agree with your point of view. Patrick King sheds some light on what happens when emotions dictate a conversation: "People who are weak thinkers often speak with their emotions. They blurt out their discontent and unhappiness first, and logic follows if at all.

They can't tell you their reasons. They just feel that way, and that doesn't help anyone."<sup>3</sup>

Proverbs 12:16 states, "Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult" (NIV). Therefore, no matter the topic, make sure you balance facts and feelings. As Aristotle conveyed with his rhetorical triangle, speaking the truth to the mind as well as to the heart is remarkably effective. To exercise proper rhetoric, you must be patient and learn to argue with restraint. The bottom line is that you can have a *spirited* conversation without being *mean spirited*.

If you have a defensive spirit, ask the Holy Spirit to work in your heart and help you to be more sympathetic and teachable.

### *Excuse #3: I Get Uncomfortable*

The third excuse, "I get uncomfortable," is probably the most common excuse for avoiding challenging conversations because no one likes to be in an uncomfortable situation.

In her stirring book *The Charisma Myth*, Olivia Fox Cabane sheds some light on why feeling uncomfortable is something we attempt to avoid every time. She writes, "Mental discomfort can result from anxiety, dissatisfaction, self-criticism, or self-doubt, all of which are forms of internal negativity, and each of which can hamper our personal charisma potential."<sup>4</sup>

If you want to improve your conversational skills, you're going to have to face your fears and allow God to give you the courage to speak up. You cannot afford to let discomfort inhibit you from being real and truthful. We will go into more detail on this later, but for now, let me mention two handy ways to overcome discomfort.

The first way is to make your friend comfortable.

*What?* you might be thinking. *How does that help my discomfort?*

Well, the more concerned you are with making your friend feel comfortable, the less worried you will be about your own discomfort.

And if you make your friend feel at home, they will, in turn, help make you feel more comfortable.<sup>5</sup>

The second way to overcome discomfort is to get things out in the open. This can be achieved by simply saying, “I’m uncomfortable right now” or “I’m nervous about having this conversation with you, because I care about you and don’t want anything to come between us.”

A good example of a person who has mastered the art of making people feel comfortable is my wife. Her genuineness is infectious. She is always looking to make people feel loved and is usually the one who is willing to put herself out there in order to help people feel relaxed.

## **Become an Advocate**

Underneath the excuses of not being smart enough, getting defensive, and feeling uncomfortable is a more deep-seated issue you need to be aware of. If you get defensive, for example, you may either attack or shut down because you have learned to condition yourself to react in that way. Ignorance and discomfort can also lead to either aggressiveness or avoidance.

These three excuses break down into two types of characters with different approaches to conversations: the aggressor, who speaks down to people and dominates the conversation, and the avoider, who is reluctant to do or say anything.

But the aggressor and the avoider are not exemplary characters and don’t align with Christian living. Instead, I would like you to picture yourself taking on an entirely different character and approach.

To explain, I need you to go back to your childhood and drum up a character you loved playing make-believe as a kid.

Got it?

Okay. Good.

For me, it was Superman. When I was about six or seven, I owned a pair of Superman pajamas that came with a cape attached

with Velcro. I would fly around my house, saving the world from danger. Of course, the threat was my wiener dog and a few toys that I would stand up and knock down. I loved pretending to be Superman because of his superpowers, charisma, and desire to save people from harm.

I'm not asking you to play a make-believe character. But in a similar vein, I want you to imagine taking on a character that represents the qualities and abilities of a strong believer in Christ.

Instead of dodging or attacking people, I want you to see yourself engaging with and loving people and being willing to have challenging conversations with them. I want you to envision becoming an advocator of God's truth.

Throughout this book, we will be discussing how to be an advocator instead of an aggressor or an avoider. See the following table for a breakdown and contrast of these three characters and approaches.

AGGRESSOR	ADVOCATOR	AVOIDER
Controller	Exhorter	Enabler
Dominate	Conversant	Reluctant
Speak down	Speak up	Speak away
Mocking questions	Asking questions	Avoiding questions
Harsh judgment	Self-judgment	Passive judgment
Impatient, disruptive, dis-comforted, self-interested	Patient, productive, comfortable, interested	Passive, unproductive, un-comfortable, disinterested
Controls conversations by correcting and overpowering: "You don't know what you're talking about."	Looks to have meaningful conversations: "Can you help me better understand your position?"	Avoids conversations by talking about other things: "I don't want to talk about this."

To stop responding with aggression or avoidance, you will need to learn how to become an advocator of God's truth. You will need to become a conversant Christian who speaks the truth in love and is skilled at navigating the cultural milieu with boldness and discernment.<sup>6</sup>

This will require a great deal of spiritual discipline on your part, especially if you are accustomed to being an aggressor or an avoider. But in time, you will start experiencing a greater love for God, and the respect you learn to carry for others will make your relationships far more productive and cherished than if you remained ignorant, prideful, or uncomfortable.

To become an advocator, you will need to gain knowledge regarding the controversial issues discussed in this book and learn how to use the three tactics that will help you handle any challenging conversation: relate (personalize the conversation), investigate (analyze the conversation), and translate (harmonize the conversation).



### **Tactic #1: Relate (Personalize the Conversation)**

We usually go into a challenging conversation with guns blazing. Our objective is to straighten the other person out. But when was the last time that worked for you? Coming in too hot will only burn bridges. Proverbs 18:19 states, “A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle.” Translation? You will get nowhere by ticking the other

person off. No one, I mean *no one*, responds well to attacks or insults.

As an advocator, your job is to win the other person over, not to make off-base accusations. You do this by *conversing* with them, not *lecturing* them. Your approach is to honor them as a person made in the image of God—not disparage them if they don’t conform to your point of view. Your starting position isn’t “I’m going to set you straight.” It’s “I want to gain a better understanding of your position and why you hold it.”

The following six suggestions will help you personalize the conversation with the other person.

### *Set the Tone*

After a long speaking tour, my wife and I thought it was a good idea to stop and see my family in Tucson. That first night at my parents’ house, I walked into their study and noticed a big book on the shelf. It wasn’t so much the size that caught my eye but the title. I planned to sleep, not read. But after seeing the title, sleep could wait. I reached up and pulled out *The Big Book on How to Say It* from the bookshelf.

As usual, I turned the book over to read the back cover and then proceeded to look through the table of contents. As I skimmed the pages, a section on phrases piqued my interest. I turned to page 399, where I found a laundry list of phrases that I think are great openers to help set the tone before diving into a controversial topic. Here are a few that stood out to me:

- Happy to sit down and discuss . . .
- Would like to hear your side . . .
- Appreciate your willingness . . .
- Let’s come to terms . . .
- Find a middle ground . . .
- Give and take . . .<sup>7</sup>

These phrases will help set the right tone so that you can have a civil conversation with someone. And before voicing your differences, it would be beneficial for both of you to agree to a few ground rules to improve the chances of a fruitful dialogue: start with prayer, be respectful, be honest, and remain calm.

### *Build Rapport*

In my younger years, when studying philosophy and apologetics, the goal was never about building rapport. It was about who could make the most persuasive argument while entrapping their opponent in a series of fallacies and contradictions. As I've matured, I've come to learn that building rapport is much more meaningful and useful.

Henry Cloud and John Townsend recommend balancing two things when confronting differences with another person: grace and truth. "Grace is your being on the side of, or "for," the other person as well as the relationship. Truth is the reality of whatever you need to say about the problem. This balancing combination is referred to as being neutralized. Being neutralized doesn't mean being neutral about the problem—not taking a side or expressing an opinion. In fact, the clearer you express your opinion, the better your chances of success."<sup>8</sup>

Yes, present your point of view as persuasively as you can but not at the expense of shooting down the chance to find commonality. John C. Maxwell, the leadership guru, explains it this way: "You develop credibility with people when you connect with them and show that you genuinely want to help them."<sup>9</sup> To do this, you must talk less and listen more. The best way to deflect attention from yourself is to ask questions. And you can't ask the right questions if you're not a good listener.

An example of someone who built rapport with a diverse audience is the Academy Award-winning actor Leonardo DiCaprio. In a speech at the United Nations Climate Summit in 2014, DiCaprio



didn't open by telling the crowd how famous he was or reminiscing about his time on the set of *Titanic*. He stood before the world and opened with these words: "I stand before you not as an expert but as a concerned citizen, one of the four hundred thousand people who marched in the streets of New York on Sunday, and the billions of others around the world who want to solve our climate crisis."<sup>10</sup>

I may not share DiCaprio's views on climate change, but I do believe he was sincere in his desire to find solutions by first building rapport.

### *Be Careful What You Say*

Words are a great indicator of character. Jesus said, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart" (Matt. 15:18). Thus, what you say and how you say it reflect who you are.

Sometimes we think that because we're adults we can say whatever we feel like saying however we want to say it. Or if we don't like what someone is saying, we interject our opinion or underscore the disparity between us. Yet when we do this, we send the message that what they have to say isn't important, making the person feel injudicious or insignificant.

So before heading into a challenging conversation, I pray over two passages of Scripture and ask God to guide my speech and conduct. The first is Romans 12:10: "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." The word *outdo* here means "to do something with eagerness." The second passage is 1 Peter 2:17: "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers" (NIV). The word *respect* here means "to attribute high honor." Based on these two verses, when I enter a challenging conversation, my focus is to honor the other person rather than to prove I am right.

In his amusing book *Thank You for Arguing*, Jay Heinrichs makes a key observation that will help you gain points with the other person: "One way to get people to agree with you is to agree

with them—tactically, that is. Agreeing up front does not mean giving up the argument.”<sup>11</sup> Heinrichs isn’t implying that you have to fully agree with the person but is suggesting that you find some point of agreement.

That is the power of respect. Even though you don’t agree with the other person’s stance on a particular issue, you’re willing to find something the two of you agree on and to build on that commonality.

### *Be Careful How You Say It*

I remember speaking with a college student following a talk I gave on the problem of evil. As he approached me, I unknowingly placed my hands on my hips. The first thing he said was, “I’m not here to argue.” Surprised by his remark, I leaned toward him, and he quickly moved away. I then put my hands out and said, “Okay. Wait a second. I don’t know what gave you that impression, but I don’t want to argue either.”

“Oh. Good. My bad,” he responded. “It just looked like you were in a debate stance or something.”

Even though arguing was the furthest thing from my mind, my body language said differently. I then told the student that I like to stick to the old adage “An argument to be won should never be more important than a person to be loved.” He smiled. We exchanged fist pumps and had a great conversation.

The point is that your demeanor says more than you know. When you are having a conversation with someone, especially one that revolves around a controversial topic, you need to take extra precautions to make sure you are using the right body language. Folding your arms, shaking your head, and putting your hands on your hips are signs that you are frustrated or closed off. You never want to seem adversarial when discussing a controversial topic.

So pay close attention to the nonverbal cues you are intentionally or unintentionally communicating. Nodding your head shows

you are listening, smiling conveys you care, and finding ways to laugh communicates you are sociable.

### *Be Present*

Don't you hate it when you're trying to have a conversation with someone and they're not truly present?

People who zone out or check their phone during a conversation should be shot. I'm kidding. Just checking to see if you are paying attention.

Being present in a conversation is offering the gift of listening. Talking may be a central component to any discussion, but listening is at the center. When you give someone your undivided attention, you are communicating that you care about and respect them—even if you disagree with them.

I have found that if I hear someone out first, they are more likely to hear me out. Sometimes I have to remind my four kids not to talk over one another. I ask them, "Do you like it when people don't listen to you?" Their answer is always no. My follow-up question usually is, "Then can you please tell me why it's okay for you to interrupt them when they are trying to talk?"

I ask my kids these questions to remind them to show respect to one another. And a great way to do that is to listen and not interrupt. Proverbs 18:13 says, "To answer before listening—that is folly and shame" (NIV). By being a great listener, you not only make the other person feel important but also gain valuable information about what they believe and why.

### *Be Vulnerable*

When I was fifteen years old, my mom died. That left my dad, my three brothers, and me. You can imagine how difficult it was for us men to show vulnerability. It took some time, but eventually my brothers and I learned to be open and to talk about the pain of losing our mother. Although being vulnerable with one

another wasn't easy, it was a game changer in helping my family begin to heal.

Even after learning from that experience, I still find it hard to be vulnerable. For me, being vulnerable means admitting failure. It makes me feel like I'm not strong enough or smart enough to do something on my own. That may be my pride, but deep down I think it also has to do with fear—the fear that once I expose my vulnerability, someone might reject me for who I truly am. Perhaps you feel the same way.

Brené Brown, in her book *Daring Greatly*, touches on something she believes hinders people from being vulnerable. That something is shame. Brown writes, “We live in a world where most people still subscribe to the belief that shame is a good tool for keeping people in line. Not only is this wrong, but it’s dangerous.”<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately, Os Guinness offers some words of affirmation to help remove the taboo of vulnerability: “Humility and vulnerability should always be among the clear marks of the Christian advocate. We do not know the answer to every question. We will not have a satisfying response to every objection.”<sup>13</sup>

When you are willing to open yourself up to someone, let them know how much they mean to you and admit you don't have all the answers—that's being vulnerable. There's no shame in that. Such vulnerability will be a blessing to you and the other person as you engage in a challenging conversation.

## **Tactic #2: Investigate (Analyze the Conversation)**

### *Understand People's Differences*

My wife and I approach each of our four kids differently because each one is unique. If you're a parent, you know what I mean.

The same thing applies to conversations. Your position might not change, but the way you go about talking with people will differ. People have different backgrounds. Different ways of seeing

things. Different temperaments. So you will need to do some investigative work to learn more about them in your endeavor to have a productive conversation. That's what this second tactic is about.

### *Ask Good Questions*

Another part of this tactic involves asking good questions. Os Guinness says this about good questions: "First, they are indirect, and second, they are involving. A good question will never betray where it is leading to, and it is an invitation to the listener to pick it up and discover the answer for him or herself. This constructive use of questions is often traced back to the great Greek gadfly Socrates, whose probing questions stung his generation into thinking, and exposed the illogic and complacency of their unthinking."<sup>14</sup>

Probing questions are a potent weapon. We use them not only to gain clarification but also to expose inconsistencies in a person's viewpoint. A person who was a master at this was Jesus Christ. In his classic book *Teaching as Jesus Taught*, Roy B. Zuck writes, "Jesus' questions constituted powerful teaching tools. His pedagogical arsenal was full of interrogations of various kinds that pierced the minds and hearts of his listeners. Some truths that could have been conveyed by discourse or declaration were more effectively communicated by means of incisive questions, questions calling for a response either mental or verbal."<sup>15</sup>

So to be an advocator of God's truth, you need to be skilled at using questions effectively. Here are a few examples of probing questions you can use:

What exactly is it that you believe?

Would you mind clarifying what you meant by . . .

How did you come to that conclusion?

What are some experiences or life lessons that have shaped your thinking on this issue?

Are you open to hearing another perspective?

### *Make Adjustments*

You must expect the unexpected with any challenging conversation. No matter how hard you try to build rapport and ask the right questions, you can bet that the conversation will take an unexpected turn.

Conversations fluctuate. There will be highs and lows. I have had my fair share of talks that started great and then, without warning, took a nosedive. When that happens, it's best not to panic or overreact. That will only cause more drama. If the other person shuts down or something is said that disrupts the flow of the conversation, you will need to make adjustments to keep the conversation alive.

One thing I find useful is giving a compliment. I mean, come on, who doesn't like a good compliment? When things aren't going well, I will remind the other person what I like about them or compliment them on how articulate they were in presenting their case.<sup>16</sup>

To make headway, consider employing these statements:

Yeah, I can see why that makes sense to you.

I never looked at it that way.

I'm delighted you brought that up.

You make an excellent point.

We can get so worked up that without knowing it we start treating the other person like an enemy. This brings to mind the priceless words my mentor and friend Norman Geisler often said to me: "Just because you don't agree with their ideas doesn't mean you have to hate them."

### **Tactic #3: Translate (Harmonize the Conversation)**

Have you seen that funny AT&T commercial about the translator? People who don't speak the same language are in a business

meeting, and the boss looks at the translator and says, “Tell them we’re flexible.” With a smirk on his face, the translator says, “Don’t worry. My Dutch is okay.” With a concerned look, the boss responds nervously, “Just okay?”

The point is that being an “okay” translator is not okay.

With this final tactic, I want you to think of yourself as not just an “okay” translator but an excellent one.

As the conversation draws to a close and before you part ways, your job is to harmonize the conversation by answering three critical questions: (1) What did we learn? (2) Where do we agree? and (3) Where do we go from here?

#### *What Did We Learn?*

Before ending the conversation, explain what you learned. Thoroughly repeating back the other person’s position will say a lot to them. It shows them you care, you listened, and you take these matters very seriously. You never want to oversimplify their argument or make assumptions. Doing so would be a costly mistake on your part.

#### *Where Do We Agree?*

I tell people that it’s harder to be 100 percent in disagreement than it is to be 100 percent in agreement. No matter how far apart you feel the two of you are, there is most likely something you both can agree on.

There will be some who will argue away your arguments, doubt your reasons, and refuse to agree with you on practically anything, no matter how hard you try. But guess what? That’s not on you; it’s on them. In *Fool’s Talk*, Os Guinness writes these candid words: “There are therefore no foolproof methods of persuasion, and those that come closest are coercive and dangerous because they override the will rather than convince the mind.”<sup>17</sup> Never forget that your intention was never to change the other person’s mind.

So if they remain disagreeable, make it known that you agree to disagree.

*Where Do We Go from Here?*

After engaging in a challenging conversation, people usually gulp down their last few ounces of coffee and part ways without figuring out the next steps in their relationship. If the two of you need space, then agree to that. If, however, you both felt the conversation cleared up some confusion and you want to continue dialoguing, then commit to doing so. Discussing the next steps forces the two of you to evaluate not only the conversation but also the relationship. After discussing where to go from here, end the conversation with prayer.

Now that you have these three effective tactics in your arsenal, let's shift our focus to some of the most controversial topics dividing the church and see how an advocator of God's truth should respond to each one.