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Speaking Truth in Love

Guest: Tim Muehlhoff
From the series: Winsome Persuasion (Day 1 of 2)
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Bob: Do you find yourself, in certain conversations, wondering whether the right thing to do is to speak up and defend your values or just to keep your mouth shut to avoid a conflict? Dr. Tim Muehlhoff understands this dilemma.

Tim: I have a position that’s the minority position. I want people to listen to me. I don’t want this to be a verbal fistfight; I want to, with civility, engage other people. I think Christians today want to do that; we just don’t know how to do it.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, August 28th. Our host is Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. When it’s time to speak, we need to know how to do that. We'll talk with Dr. Tim Muehlhoff about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. So, I think we’re going to spend a lot of time kind of mulling around on how truth and grace coexist in our world and how we need to teach our kids to be full of truth and grace—how we need to model what truth and grace look like in our own lives—because there are a lot of people, who are looking at us. They may not see the grace that we keep telling them about.

Dennis: You’re exactly right, Bob. We’ve had a lot of very timely books here, on FamilyLife Today, and the authors of those books over the years, but none more timely than Tim Muehlhoff’s book, Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World. Tim, welcome.

Tim: Thank you.

Dennis: Welcome back to the broadcast.

Tim: It’s great to be here.

Dennis: Tim is a professor at Biola University in Southern California. He also is the Director of Resources for Biola’s Center for Marriage and Family Relationships. He and his wife Noreen have been married since 1990; they have three children. They’ve been speaking at the Weekend to Remember® marriage getaways for 22 years.
Tim: That’s right.

Dennis: Tim, you’ve written a book here which I think is so important—for single people, who are engaging with others who don’t believe as they believe; for married couples, who are mixing it up with other married couples at work, or in school, in their neighborhood; for parents, who are raising kids, as Bob said, who need to know how to navigate a post-Christian world and how to stand for something but do it in a winsome way. We really can do this thing, standing for truth and on behalf of the gospel in a post-Christian world.

Tim: Yes; I would agree with that. The stereotype of us is that we’re not doing a good job on the love part of it—that we’re full of truth; not much grace / not much empathy for other people’s situations. One of the great things about this book is—I wrote it with a dear friend of mine, Rick Langer, who is one of Biola’s top theologian philosophers. We were just deeply troubled with what we see in today’s argument culture—that’s a term by Deborah Tannen from Georgetown—that we approach everything as if it’s a verbal slugfest. People are tired of it; and yet, we don’t know how to get out of it.

As Christians, this is a great opportunity for us to step up to the plate and say, “We can be people of conviction, but we are going to speak truth in such a way that it’s going to shine well beyond what the argument culture does today.” As Christians, this is a golden opportunity for us to be winsome in our persuasion and not always being so aggressive and fitting into negative stereotypes.

Dennis: I want to ask you to just illustrate what we’re talking about here with something that took place in Biola’s history—it’s a 60-foot tall Jesus that was, I guess, on a building on campus; right?

Tim: [Laughter] Yes; on our science building.

Dennis: A mural?

Tim: Yes.

Dennis: Yes; tell us about it, and then explain how that illustrates what you’re talking about in your book.

Tim: Yes; this is a mural done by a very famous muralist in Los Angeles, Kent Twitchell; and he gave it to Biola University. It’s a 60-foot Jesus—who is done after a Russian model—is what his source material is—but over time, Jesus became [whiter] as the sun would obviously beat down on it.

Our students of color—I mean, every day, they’re greeted by a 60-foot, increasingly white, Jesus. We struggle with diversity a little bit at Biola. Our students started to feel
like: “Is this my Jesus? Can I be at home at a university where every day I’m greeted by a Jesus who just doesn’t look like me?”

Now, if you’re the minority perspective, how do you get people to listen to you?—that’s what *Winsome Persuasion* is about. If you were to grab the majority of students at Biola University and say, “What do you think of the Jesus mural?” they would say: “Oh, it’s great. I love it! It’s awesome.” But students of color were bothered by it, so how do they get their voice out? How do they actually change opinion on what should be done with the Jesus mural?

Now, that is a *great* illustration for us; because we are like those students of color—increasingly, the minority perspective in the United States. For example, when it comes to same-sex marriage—in 2001, 57 percent of Americans opposed same-sex marriage. In 2017, according to Pew research, 62 percent of Americans support gay marriage. By the way, pre-marital sex—today, current Gallup statistics—only 38 percent of Americans would say that pre-marital sex is immoral.

So, when it comes to being a Christian today, we’re like those minority students on Biola’s campus—I have a position that’s the minority position. I want people to listen to me; I don’t want this to be a verbal fistfight. I want to, with civility, engage other people. I think Christians today want to do that; we just don’t know how to do it.

**Dennis:** Bob will remember this—we had Caleb Kaltenbach on the show a number of years ago. He made the statement, “Christians have to realize that they've never been the home team, and we’re certainly not the home team now.” You’re talking about a total person communication of how we engage a culture that doesn’t agree with us.

**Tim:** And we’re pulling from two source materials. One is the Bible. The Bible—the early church—they were the counter-public / they were the minority perspective; and yet, they gained a hearing that shocks historians and sociologists today. How in the world did the early church grow at such a fast rate and really take over large parts of the world? How in the world did that happen?

We’re also combining that with communication principles—taken from communication theory. If you’re the minority perspective, how do you gain the attention of a dominant perspective? How do you get credibility that people actually listen to you? Aristotle was brilliant when it came to what he called ethos; that is: “Your personal credibility/your reputation”—Aristotle said—“is the most important thing about you.” When you walk into that room, your reputation precedes you; so you have to work on your reputation. Aristotle was brilliant in telling us how to foster good credentials with other people.

So, we pull in Bible, current examples, communication theory; and we try to make it practical so that communities—churches/local groups—really can engage at the local level and make a difference for the Christian perspective.
**Dennis:** When Bob and I talked about starting *FamilyLife Today* 26 years ago, we had decided we did not want to go on the air and be pounding the table with a culture wars mentality.

**Tim:** Right.

**Dennis:** We wanted to be known by what we’re *for*, not by what we’re against. Now, that’s been an interesting tension over the years; because there are a lot of things that are occurring in our culture that I can’t embrace / I don’t believe in. But what we’ve tried to do is present the Scriptures—in a winsome way, a persuasive way, a compassionate way—realizing there are listeners, who don’t believe as we believe, but to continue that so that they can listen to what we have, here, on *FamilyLife Today*.

**Tim:** Yes; Rick Langer, my co-author, brilliantly lays out three different voices that seem to be present in Scripture. First is what we call the prophetic voice, which means “Thus sayeth the Lord…” “This is the Word of the Lord, and I’m sorry if it hurts your feelings; but this is biblical truth.”

Second is what we call the pastoral voice, which means that truth most likely hurt you in some ways—it hurt your feelings, or your community’s going through a really difficult time. My first step is to come alongside of you and pastorally *care* for you; and then last is the persuasive voice, where I try to *convince* you of my perspective.

Now, here’s what we say in the book: “We’re not anti-prophetic. We just feel like the church has gotten to be *known* as the prophetic church—that we are pounding the table, and we *are* coming across as angry. Sometimes, the prophetic—it just isn’t appropriate for the situation.” For example, you don’t run up to a car accident, stick your head in the window, and say: “See? You should have been wearing seatbelts.” Now, there’s a time for arguing for seatbelts, but that is not the time. It would be the pastoral voice you’d want at the scene of an accident—right?—caring for people, regardless of what they believed.

So we believe that the pastoral, the prophetic, and the persuasive—we want to write a book that really focuses on the pastoral: “Let’s really care for and love people, who may disagree with us, as we seek to persuade them of the truth; but that thing you learned in Sunday school is really true.” From communication theory perspective: “Unless a person knows you care about them, they don’t care what you believe.”

Now, that is *great* news for the church; because we’ve *excelled* at neighbor love in the past. That’s what got us a hearing with the Roman Empire—was not our brilliant arguments—but the fact that two major plagues hit the Roman Empire—mortality rates of upwards of 30 percent. The church stepped up and risked their lives to help people with the plague.
If we do that kind of neighbor love today, we open the door for the prophetic voice; we open the door for the persuasive voice; but I think we need to first show people, “We love you and are willing to sacrifice for you.” That is not what the Christian church is known for today.

Bob: I read a book three decades ago that kind of summarizes what you’re talking about. It’s a book that was—I don’t know that it’s still in print—it’s called *The Samaritan Strategy*. The author of the book made the statement I’ve never forgotten—he said, “On the issue of abortion,”—this was 1988—he said, “On the issue of abortion, if a politician stands up and says, ‘Abortion is wrong, and it should be outlawed in our country,’” he said, “those who disagree just say, ‘Sit down and shut up.’”

He said: “When Mother Teresa comes to the prayer breakfast and she stands up and says: ‘Give me your babies. Don’t kill them, give them to me; I will take care of them,’” he said “even her opponents sit respectfully and quietly, unable to do or say anything in the presence of Mother Teresa.”

That’s the point you’re making; isn’t it?

Tim: Yes; you earn the right to be heard. That’s Communication Theory 101: “You earn the right to be heard.”

Let’s go back to Aristotle just for a second. Aristotle said your credibility is based on three things: one, he calls it intellect: “Can I, with integrity, present both sides of an issue? I can argue for both; and then, I later decide: “Which is the stronger argument?” or “My convictions lead me here...” Now, right away, the Christian church fails dramatically—like: “Hey, don’t be reading that stuff! What are you doing?—reading the Quran? “What are you doing?—reading that atheist thinker?”

So, the very first criterion—already, as Christian persuasionists—we’re behind the eight-ball, because we don’t know other perspectives. We come across as being ignorant, isolated, and “What do you mean?—you don’t know about Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*? What are you guys reading over there?” The answer is: “We’re just reading Christian writers.”

Now, we could say, “Hey, that’s true of Berkeley,” but we need to step back and say: “No, no; no. As Christians, we’re going to be well-rounded, and we’re not going to be afraid of the truth,” and “When we present somebody else’s perspective, we’re going to present the best version of it, not a demonized version of it.”

Bob: And when you can do that—when you can present somebody else’s argument fairly and winsomely—and they hear you doing that, they’re now more open to hear what you’re about to say than if all you’re doing is caricaturizing and making straw men out of them; right?
Tim: Yes; but Bob, think of how rare that is.

Bob: I know!

Tim: So again, isn’t this funny? We’re halfway through an interview, and we’re only on one part of Aristotle’s criteria for credibility, and that is intellect. I think we’re realizing we’re not doing a great job on this.

The second one is virtue. Aristotle would want to say: “Do you live out what you say publicly? Is this part of your life? Is there a track record of people seeing you living out what you profess to be true?”

Now, here’s the third one that I think we miss the most. Aristotle said, “You have to have goodwill towards people.” In other words, “I believe the best about you, not the worst about you.” All my students in my classes read “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” by Martin Luther King, Jr.—where he refuses to demonize the very white pastors, who are trying to shut down his protest movement of nonviolence. In the book, we have historical sketches of Harriet Beecher Stowe, of Wilberforce, of St. Patrick. What unified those individuals?—they refused to demonize the opposition.

Today, we have Christian blogs; we have Christian shows, where we just demonize people. Again, I think Aristotle would say, “But where’s your goodwill towards these people?” Again, how we speak about certain political candidates or people who disagree with the Christian position—this is not speaking truth in love. Remember what Peter said: “I want you to be ready to give a defense of your faith, but do it with gentleness and respect.” I think we’ve lost the gentleness and respect part, and that’s why we wrote Winsome Persuasion.

Bob: I’m going to paraphrase a quote that’s one of my favorite quotes that I think echoes what you’re saying. This is from Tim Keller—he says, “It is the gospel that gives us, as Christians, the humility to say, ‘I can learn from people I disagree with, from the culture around me.’” It’s a fundamental humility that says, “I don’t have all the answers.” Most of us, as Christians, go into an argument, thinking, “I do have all the answers, and you don’t have any of them.” But humility would say: “No; I don’t have all the answers. I think I know what truth is, but I don’t have all the answers.”

He then says, “It’s the gospel that gives us the confidence to say: ‘I have something I can offer here. I can give to this conversation,’” and “It’s the gospel that gives us the courage to say, ‘I don’t have to fear the culture around me.’” He said, when you have—the humility, the confidence, and the courage—you can have effective ministry that honors God and blesses others.

Tim: That’s right, Bob. I agree with that. And goodwill is also lived out in practical ways. Goodwill means: “I care about you and your community. I am there to help you.”
So, let’s take the transgender community, just for a second, an incredibly at-risk community. Studies show that upwards of 40 percent of transgendered individuals have thought about suicide or attempted suicide. As a Christian community, we have thoughts about sexuality; we have thoughts about gender—right?—that we think are biblical. But to come alongside a transgendered person and say: “Listen, is that true that 40 percent of your community regularly thinks about suicide?—that you feel bullied everywhere you go? My goodness; if it’s the Christian community doing the bullying, I want to apologize for that. We want to nip that in the bud.”

And yet, the way we talk about the transgendered / the way we roll our eyes about the transgendered really concerns me. I was speaking at a conference. A pastor walks up to me and goes: “Oh, I have a solution for the transgender problem. Let’s have three bathrooms: he, she, [and] it.” I looked at this pastor and I said, “Hey, I don’t know you; but we don’t refer to people made in God’s image as in ‘it.’” He said to me, “Oh, come on; I’m just kidding.” I said, “To me, that makes it worse.”

Bob: Tim, I have to interject here, because you know this. We can strive to model exactly what you’re talking about and say: “Look, I care about you as a person. I care about the struggles you’re feeling.” and that person’s going to turn to us and say, “But do you think what I’m doing is sinful?”

At that moment—when we say, “I do think that you’ve embraced a sinful perspective on your sexuality,”—at that point, the person says, “Then I have nothing more to hear from you, and you must hate me.”

Tim: Okay; let’s bring in the pastoral. If I’m dealing with a transgendered student, who is thinking about thoughts of suicide / who feels bullied everywhere, that’s when I step into the pastoral and I say: “Listen, we need to deal with this right now. Are you really having suicide thoughts?”

Bob: Right.

Tim: “Yes; I am.” “Okay; let’s deal with that.”

Bob: But when he says to you, “But don’t you think that my fundamental transgendered identity is sinful?”

Tim: Yes; “We can deal with that later.”

Bob: You just put that off for the moment?

Tim: The Book of Proverbs: “A word spoken in the right circumstances is compared to fine jewelry,”—this is not the right circumstances.

Bob: —to have that conversation.
Tim: This is a car accident. I do believe in seatbelts; and I do poke my head in there and I look at the tragedy caused by not wearing seatbelts—this is not the time to talk about my philosophy of seatbelts.

Bob: Okay.

Tim: This is the time to help you. Once you’re helped—again, this isn’t the early church saying, “Okay; plague victims, as we’re trying to nurse you to health, let’s talk about the sins of the Roman Empire.” No: “Let’s first help you, bodily.”

I think sometimes, as Christians, we want to have this gospel conversation or ideological conversation on the frontend, which they don’t care. Remember the Sunday school—

Bob: Right.

Tim: —“Unless I know you care about me, I don’t care what you think about these issues.”

Winsome Persuasion is persuasion—I do want this person to eventually adopt a view of biblical flourishing that I think is going to help them, ultimately. But when a person’s thinking of suicide or being bullied, I step in and say: “Okay; here’s what the church is going to do. We’re stopping this bullying stuff right now. We are going to be your strongest advocate when it comes to bullying, because I don’t care who you are; you don’t get bullied.”

Once we do that, then let’s have a conversation. If they bring it up, now’s not the time to talk about it. And again, when I was in grad school, I was the most conservative person, by a mile, in grad school. I loved my professors and fellow Ph.D. students at USC Chapel Hill. I didn’t have any respect to bring into question things that they believed deeply. It took me years to garner that kind of ethos / that kind of respect. And you know what it was?—it was caring for people. It was showing up at their presentations / it was caring for them when the copier didn’t work, and they didn’t know what to do, and they had to run off to class; and I said, “Listen, give me it. I’ll do the copying, and I’ll get…” This neighbor love thing is because we truly do love people.

Now, we don’t do it just to share the gospel. See, that’s what sophists would do; right?—“This is a rhetorical trick—neighbor love—to get you to lower your defenses so I can slip in the gospel.” No; Jesus says neighbor love can stand on its own. We love people, because they’re made in the image of God; so Winsome Persuasion, our book, could have been called Winsome Neighbor Love.

The New Testament church flourished because Romans knew, at the end of the day: “I was loved by people who were willing to lay down their lives for my safety. Even if I
never come around to the gospel, they still would lay down their life; because I’m made in the image of God and they care for me deeply.” That kind of love is the Mother Teresa love we’re talking about that gets us into the game to have productive conversations.

**Dennis:** In 26 years of broadcasting, I’ve made a lot of mistakes, here, on *FamilyLife Today*; but occasionally, we’ll do something that really resonates with a person. I’ll never forget the email that came from a transgendered person in Washington, DC. This person wrote to tell us how, as a person, he had been rejected by the church on multiple occasions when he came out and shared his gender; and he said: “But I didn’t hear that kind of bullying, that kind of rejection, that kind of withdrawal of relationship when you had your guest on *FamilyLife Today*. You talked directly to me. You spoke with love to me; and I just wanted to write and say, ‘Thank you.’”

You said it earlier: “All people are made in the image of God.” Even the people who don’t believe as we believe are image-bearers. How then shall we love them, and how should we speak of them, and how should we speak to them? Your book, *Winsome Persuasion*, is a great exhortation for us to up our game and to represent Jesus Christ with authenticity and with the true love of Christ.

**Bob:** Well, and it may be that not everybody agrees on tactics as we engage with others, but I think everybody can agree that we have to be full of grace and full of truth as we represent Christ in our world; and we haven’t always done that well.

I’d encourage people to get a copy of Dr. Muehlhoff’s book, *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World*. We have copies of the book in our *FamilyLife Today* Resource Center. You can order it from us, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call 1-800-FL-TODAY to order. Again, the website is FamilyLifeToday.com; or call to order the book, *Winsome Persuasion*. Our number is 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.”

You know, one of our goals, here, at FamilyLife®, is to speak the truth in love every day on this program. We want, not only to represent the truth of the Bible, we want to represent it with grace, with love, with kindness. Our prayer is that this program would continue, by God’s grace, to impact more and more people, year in and year out. We want to say, “Thank you,” to those of you who partner with us. You’re helping us reach more people, more regularly, with God’s blueprints for marriage and family.

During the month of August, we’ve had some friends of the ministry, who have offered to match every donation we receive during this month on a dollar-for-dollar basis, up to a total of $500,000. The month is winding down, and we want to ask those of you, who are regular *FamilyLife Today* listeners, to go online or to call us and make a donation so that we can take full advantage of this matching-gift opportunity.
You can donate, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com. You can call 1-800-FL-TODAY to donate; and when you do, we want to say, “Thank you,” by sending you a copy of Dennis and Barbara Rainey’s new book, The Art of Parenting. It’s our way of saying, “Thank you for all you do to make FamilyLife Today possible and for partnering with us in this outreach.”

And we hope you can join us back again tomorrow. We’re going to continue our conversation with Tim Muehlhoff about how we can speak the truth in love, full of grace and truth, in a post-Christian world. I hope you can tune in for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back tomorrow for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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