

Ben Best, co-host

Welcome to *Defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity. When it comes to discussing controversial topics, it's tempting to go to one of two extremes, either to engage people with vitriol, anger, and contentiousness in our determination to make them see things our way or to totally avoid talking about important, yet potentially controversial subjects altogether in an attempt to keep the peace. And neither is a viable option for followers of Jesus. In this episode, Dr. Sean McDowell joins Dr. Keith Plummer to talk about having meaningful and respectful conversations with those whom we have strong disagreements. Let's join their discussion now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

If you're interested Apologetics, the name of my guest is no doubt one with which you're familiar. Dr. Sean McDowell is an associate professor in the Christian Apologetics program at Biola University's Talbot School of Theology. Sean is the co-host of the *Think Biblically* podcast with his colleague, Dr. Scott Ray. He also hosts a well-trafficked YouTube channel. He's the author, co-author, or editor of more than 20 books, one of which I asked him to talk with me about today, and that is *End the Stalemate: Move Past Cancel Culture to Meaningful Conversations*, which he co-authored with his Biola colleague, Dr. Tim Muehlhoff, published by Tyndale. Sean, it's a pleasure to be able to talk with you. Thanks for making the time.

Dr. Sean McDowell

Oh, Keith. Honored to do it. Glad we got to meet in person recently, and I've been looking forward to this conversation.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Me too. Well, I'm going to start at the back of the book because in the conclusion, you make a confession—and you say that with some great discomfort—that you write a book like this in any way, setting yourself up as an example. But as I mentioned to you before, when I knew that you and Tim wrote this book, I did want to speak with you about it because I have been following, listening, and particularly listening, reading, watching at times. And I have been very impressed and helped by the manner in which you have engaged people with whom you have, in some cases, serious disagreement. But I have really appreciated not only the subject matter with which you have engaged people, but the manner. And one that really stood out to me was your engagement with Matthew Vines in 2018, the founder and President of the Reformation Project, the writer of *God and the Gay Christian*, where you were talking about the Bible and homosexuality, and that is just one of a number of encounters that I have seen you in that have

made me take note. So when I saw that you and Tim were doing this book, I thought, I want to read it and I want to talk with him about it. Tell us a little bit about how the book came to be and what it is that you're seeking to accomplish in it.

Dr. Sean McDowell

Yeah, that brings a lot of memories back, that engagement with Matthew Vines. I can't believe it's been seven years ago now. I've had a lot of conversations like that recently, but that was a very formative, unique time in the culture in the church as well. Actually, it was Tim's idea to do the book. Tim Muehlhoff and I have been friends since the '90s. I met him when I went to the communication seminar and he was working with CRU at that point. And instantly, it was like, wow, this guy is funny. He is smart. He's articulate. Just hit it off and became friends. But he came to me, maybe it's been, I don't know, two-three years now. He said, Sean—he's a communication scholar. He's published in this, has this PhD in communications—he goes, I have some scholarly research behind this, but you're really also a practitioner. You're doing this on your YouTube channel, at different events offline. What do you think about writing a book together, helping people do this?

Dr. Sean McDowell

Now, right away, I thought, wow, a chance to write a book with Tim Muehlhoff is awesome. I've thought the world of him, he's a good friend forever. He's probably shaped me as much or more than anybody in terms of the way I communicate in these kinds of dialogues. He's a Biola colleague, so it was just perfect. It was really an easy decision to do. Then we just sat down and started charting out what topics do we cover, what expertise do we bring, how do we arrange the book, and all the fun details of actually writing a book.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, the book starts out where you're explaining what kind of climate we're in. There are some really depressing, in some ways, statistics, among which you say since the 2016 presidential election, nearly a third of people report they have stopped talking to a friend or a family member due to political disagreements. You also referred to a comprehensive survey of college students, according to which a large number of students, quote, believe it is acceptable to act including resorting to violence to shut down expression of opinions they consider offensive. You and Tim say that we are in the midst of a perfect storm of cultural factors that foster anger and division. Before we move to—because it doesn't stop there, I mean, there is hope that you guys give a lot of it—but what are some of those cultural factors that make ours an especially ripe time for anger and division?

Dr. Sean McDowell

Yeah, those stats really are depressing and discouraging, but they're not really news to anybody. People read them and go, Oh, yeah, that happened to me. That happened to my daughter. That happened to me from family. It scratches where people itch. Now, I'd like to see new data. That was on the 2016 election, which, of course, was Trump's first term. Have things gotten better or worse in the 2024 election? I'd like to see some data come out about that. What's fascinating is this isn't just a Christian phenomena. Two days ago, I was zooming with an atheist friend who he and I are actually talking about writing a book together. This book, *End the Stalmate*, Tim and I wrote together about how to do this. We're going to do a follow-up point, counterpoint book together and try to model how to have conversations across radically different divides. He said to me, he's like, Sean, somebody that he knows was moving more conservatively, and this became a problem for his family and beyond.

Dr. Sean McDowell

I thought, wow, there's a lot of Christians who get upset when people move to the left or the right. There's a lot of atheists who get upset when people move to the left or the right. This is the cultural moment that we are in. I thought a lot about this. I was like, why do we have this perfect storm? Of course, that comes from the movie, and I think there might have been a book about it. I think in the early '90s, there was three or four storms that just coalesced in the northeast, much closer to you than to me, and made this mega storm. And I started thinking about research, and I think there's a few factors. Number one is we have a lot of hurting, broken, people. Now, we've all heard it said, Hurt people, hurt people. Now, we all have brokenness, we all have hurts. But if we don't find healthy outlets to process our hurt and pain and disappointments, they will often manifest themselves in the way we treat other people. And there's just hurt and brokenness that has not been dealt with in our culture. We've even seen things like anxiety and depression and loneliness and suicidality raising and increasing, well, that's below the surface. If it's not dealt with in a healthy fashion, often comes out and contributes to the climate that we have, so to speak.

Dr. Sean McDowell

The second one I pulled out was clashing worldviews, how much we've seen, I think within the church and outside the church, all these issues have bubbled up that are just dividing us like never before. Maybe it's vaccines for a period of time, maybe it's critical race theory within the church, whether it's we use preferred pronouns or not. I mean, there's just so many issues that people are dividing over. The point has become, if you don't hold my issue or if you don't speak

up on this issue and tell us what you believe and why, then we're going to criticize you. So it's not that these issues are unimportant, but it's like we're at a cultural moment where if you don't express a certain view in a certain way, people are going to pile on you and cancel you. And it just feels like there's wood with gas on it waiting to be lit up in many circumstances.

Dr. Sean McDowell

The third one that's obvious is social media, is that we've all seen the studies on this, that social media, I think as much as I love social media, I'm not against it, I use it. It is a tool that's built in a way to favor criticizing and anger more than common ground and kindness. It's just whether it's YouTube, whether it's Twitter, whatever the medium is, they're built in a way that encourage us to exacerbate us to provoke, and they get shared more in the analytics. That's a piece of it. I think the last one, Keith, is people just have lost the ability to communicate. We don't know how to ask good questions. We don't know how to listen. We don't know how to find common ground. We don't know how to just be charitable because we're impatient. You start adding these things together, like social media phenomenon. You add together the clashing worldviews, emotional brokenness. It's like you put these factors together, I'd be surprised if we didn't have a cancel culture.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, on that last point, you relate some of your observations from an experiment that you have done over the years in terms of taking on the role of an atheist in talking with Christian audiences and some of the disconcerting things that you have experienced over the years you've done this. Would you share a little bit about what have you taken away, generally, from your doing that?

Dr. Sean McDowell

Probably 12 or 15 years ago, I decided when I was at conferences, camps, churches, I would do a role play. Now, there's probably a handful of times where people really thought I was an atheist when a teacher, a speaker asked me to really roleplay that. But 99% of the time, I'll say, Look, I'm Sean. I'm a Christian apologist. I'm going to put these glasses on and I'm going to tell you my story, which I adapt from a friend of mine who used to be Christian and he's an atheist. Then I'm going to open up for some questions. You can ask me whatever you want. And I've done this with pastors, I've done this with parents, youth pastors, high school students. I've done it overseas. I've done a classroom with 12 students and a stadium of 8,000 students, which I think was maybe too many. And what happens is the first 10, 15, 20 minutes, they ask questions and I respond. But over time, you start feeling the tension in the air where people are

like, you can see it on their faces like, oh, I don't know how to That's a better objection than I thought. You just see the tension and sometimes the anger coming out in the room. I've had people call me names. I've had people shout me down. They know that I'm a Christian. I've had people treat me in just really the worst, not the worst conceivable manner, but just a terrible fashion for somebody.

Dr. Sean McDowell

Maybe 30, 45 minutes later, I'll take glasses off and I say, All right, we're going to debrief this, but here's the first question. How did you treat your atheist guest? And, Keith, I wish you could be like a fly on the wall and see the audiences. There's often this visceral response of like, Oh, shoot. We really got mad at you. And then I'll say, give me words that describe how you treated me. Individual words. The most common words are defensive, hostile, angry, dismissive. I had one girl say she's like, depersonalized. I'm like, that's a big word. What do you mean? She's like, you became this object to just win an argument for, but not a human being to engage.

Dr. Sean McDowell

And then I just process it with people. How do we treat the people in our neighborhood. How do we treat people in our family? What stories do we use? What labels do we use? How do we have real meaningful engagement? But it doesn't descend into that and a lot of the vitriol we see online and offline in culture today. The bottomline takeaway is I think it's the exception to find a Christian who can ask a thoughtful good question with the right spirit. That is a rarity within the church.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that's unfortunate. Despite the fact that we are in the midst of this perfect storm, you and Tim exude an optimism that I think that some people would hear, and maybe it's because of the perception that we get that is distorted from what we see happening on social media all the time, you say, "Here's the good news. Most people want to have meaningful conversations about issues that matter." I would imagine that might take some persuading for people when they think about that people are actually more willing to engage in potentially explosive subjects. Why is it that you think that that is so? I Why is it that you have that conviction, you and Tim, that there are more people out there willing to have these kinds of meaningful conversations than not?

Dr. Sean McDowell

This comes from my experience and the comments that I get from people who watch what I do. I've had conversations where people get upset. I haven't always handled myself perfectly, that's for sure. But I found if it's in the right way, the right attitude at the right time, most people are open to these kinds of conversations. I really think they are. Now, we're afraid to do this because we've had conversations go bad, and so we are reluctant to enter into it. But my own experience is people across the political divide, the worldview divide, whatever cultural, ethical issue it is, are open to conversation. Not all, but I'd say most people are. Then really, what I try to do on my YouTube channel is just model model for people how to do this. You can disagree firmly, you can push back, but you can treat somebody kindly and have these conversations. And I just get droves and droves of people. There's plenty of critics out there like, that's fine. But a ton of people saying, thank you for having that conversation. Now I know how to do this. So that's where my confidence comes from. And I think most people want relationship.

Dr. Sean McDowell

Most people want to be understood. I mean, the vast... Maybe I could reframe it this way. I'd say most people would be willing to share what they believe and talk about themselves. If you ask them questions thoughtfully and listen, that's what most people are willing to do. But if you want to listen and ask questions and engage someone where they're at, then oftentimes they'll reciprocate and say, Well, tell me what you think, and you're often running in a conversation.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. Well, I want to point out to folks that a lot of the illustrations that we're talking about are Christian and non-Christian, but the things that you and Tim deal with in this book can be implemented in families, in friendships, even where there is a shared general belief. There is certainly an evangelistic apologetic aspect. But one of the things that I took note of is you said that this is not something that you are advocating in terms of a strategy. It is something that you are seeking to get Christians to adopt as, this is what we're called to in terms of loving people. So that even if I could be guaranteed ahead of time, I'm not going to be able to persuade this other person of my point of view, sometimes I wonder, would I still love them? If I could be guaranteed, if I could be assured, they're never going to see things my way, would that in any way alter how it is that I treat them? Would I persist in loving them and so forth? But talk a little bit about the difference between approaching this as strictly a strategic thing and approaching this as a way of life and really discipleship.

Dr. Sean McDowell

That's a really good way you frame that question, Keith. I appreciate that. Let me compare and contrast this with another book that's written by a friend, mentor of mine, Greg Koukl. It's one of my all-time favorite apologetics books. It's called *Tactics*.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that's a great book.

Dr. Sean McDowell

The front of it has a chess board and chess pieces because you're trying to navigate and make moves to win a game. There are times in conversation where we recognize faulty thinking, we're trying to advance an argument, and win the game, so to speak. There's times that I do this. I'm not saying we shouldn't have those debates, those kinds of tactical engagement and shouldn't share our faith and hope people come to Jesus. That's not my point. What I'm saying is there are certain ways that we can love people today as Christians that we don't often do well. One thing I think about now and then, Keith, is I think, what if when somebody was just hurting or broke and went through a difficult time, their next thought was, I just need to find a Christian because a Christian will listen to me and love me, love me non-judgmentally, and be there for me? What if that was somebody's thought? My guess is for most people, unless they have a specific Christian in their life who is that way, that's probably not what their next thought is.

Dr. Sean McDowell

So if we ask ourselves, how do we love people? I think we'd approach a lot of conversations very differently. It was M. Scott Peck in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*, who said, "The best way to love someone is to listen to someone." I guess you could say there are certain strategies we talk about in the book, like asking questions, perspective-taking. These are strategies that we can use, but it's not to win an argument and defeat someone. It's to love someone. It's to understand. It's to advance a conversation and care for them. Now, with that said, I'm having ongoing conversations like this with a friend of mine who is an atheist. He said, he's like, You know what? I find Christians like yourself interesting. I'm not trying to persuade you to be a Christian. If you're an atheist, you don't think eternal life rests upon it, then I get it. I said, Look, I want you to become a Christian. I'd be disingenuous if I didn't say that because I actually think Jesus got reality right and eternity is at stake here. But I care about you, and I value you as a friend, whether you ever believe or not, I want you to know that, and a lot of our conversations are a way of expressing that.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that's good. Well, you and Tim mentioned a number of terms, and you define them, and some of them relate to how it is that we think of the nature of communication itself. There's a section in the book that differentiates between a transmission view of communication and a ritual view of communication. Could you say a brief word about what is the difference there and why does it matter as we're talking about entering into meaningful conversations with folks?

Dr. Sean McDowell

Yeah, I got to give Tim full credit for this. This is where his communication scholarship comes in. When I started to understand these ideas, I was like, Oh, man, this is good. By the way, as Christians, there's a time for the transmission view, and there's a time for the ritual view. The transmission view is very simple. You have a sender and a message a receiver. You're trying to transmit that message to the receiver. God communicates with us through the transmission view. Maybe it's with angels. You could argue with creation itself. The Bible is a transmission view. Preaching is transmission. Evangelism is transmission. Transmission is important, and it's something we as Christians need to continue to do, although I think we could be better at the transmission view, we could come back to that. The ritual view of communication is different. The ritual view is not like me delivering to you. This is a communication that's reciprocal. It's back and forth. It's not just trying to persuade; it's trying to understand. It's a relational form of communication where in some ways you step into the shoes of the other person, try to see the world as they do, and exchange in mutual understanding and dialog and really communication back and forth.

Dr. Sean McDowell

We're not saying one is better than the other. There's a time and place for each, but we would love to see Christians engage in more ritual communication to learn and grow and just love our neighbors and build relationships with them.

Dr. Keith Plummer

On that point, you talked about one of the elements of the perfect storm being a clash of worldviews. And a lot of times when we're thinking about disputes over significant matters, we do think primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of the worldview, in terms of the system of beliefs that someone holds. And you talk about worldview in the book, but you also talk about how it is that people's worldviews are formed, and in the context of relationships and the situatedness of their lives and why it is that it's important to understand that. Could you say a word about that? How do we keep from just treating people as though they are instantiations of a worldview and lose sight of the fullness of them as human beings?

Dr. Sean McDowell

I like the way you frame that, like either instantiation of a worldview or just brains on a stick, where it's just purely cognitive. Sometimes worldview thinking has been maybe reductionist in that fashion. And obviously what we think shapes how we live and how we believe. But if you really want to know why someone believes what they believe, it's typically not give me the papers they've read and give me the arguments that they're making. Oftentimes, it's the experiences they've had and it's the relationships that they've built. My dad came up with this and we put it in the book. It's like a You think of like a triangle. At the top is behavior, somebody's actions, how they live. Below that is their values. What I value about money, what I value about time will shape how I act and spend my money and spend my time. Well, below that is the worldview, which is the narrative and story that somebody sees themselves being a part of. It's how they see the world believe that it is on the big questions about God, the afterlife, life, the soul, meaning, happiness. But what shapes someone's worldview on the bottom, what my dad put, the foundation of it is relationships.

Dr. Sean McDowell

It's relationships. So I highlight in my chapter on Then Tim really draws out in the next chapter what he calls bricolage, the experience that somebody has, the relationships that really shapes their worldview. Now, why is this important? Because if I think I can reduce you down to an instantiation of a worldview or arguments, then I'm going to go solely at the arguments in terms of what you believe and keep it on the cognitive level. Now, we have to demolish arguments. We see this in 2 Corinthians, of course. But if I understand the people who have shaped you, the relationships that are involved, really the story of how you came to believe what you believe, then I can interact with you and engage in a very different effective and meaningful conversation. That's why that relational component of worldview, I think, is so important.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You say people filter ideas through relationships. If we want to influence others, we must live our lives with authenticity and be willing to engage them in genuine relationship. That was very helpful. You also discussed the difference between listening to evaluate and listening to understand, which I appreciated. And again, you're not saying that there's not a place for both, but both of them should be at work. One shouldn't be at work to the exclusion of the other. Would that be fair?

Dr. Sean McDowell

Yeah. I can think of different conversations that I've had. So I had a recently, Brandon Robertson, who as a queer Christian. The conversation was not just a fully tell your story, let me understand and present who Brandon is. He wrote a book, and he's trying to reform the church and lead a revolution. He talks about passages in the Bible like Genesis 1 and Romans 1 and Matthew 19, that they are affirming. I'm going to be respectful and kind as I can with him, but I'm going to push on where I think he does not properly interpret those passages. So I'm listening. I want to understand. I don't want to set a strawman up in his views, which is why I invite him on my channel. But I'm also listening to respond because I've thought about this a ton, and I think he's misguided. Now, with that said, I still read his stuff in the back of my mind. It's like, Okay, what is he really saying? What if he were right about this? Am I willing to change my mind to follow what's true if it makes me uncomfortable. As an academic, I still have to keep asking that question.

Dr. Sean McDowell

That's different than the conversation we're talking about in *End the Stalemate* where you just sit down. If he and I were having coffee or something like that, and I've done this on my YouTube channel sometimes, so I just sit down and just listen to somebody. I empathize with that person. I try to understand their backstory and humanize this person. That's a very different kind of listening. That's the listening that it feels good, doesn't it? When someone, especially today, just leans in and says, Tell me more about that. How did that make you feel? Help me as best you can to see the world the way you saw the world then and how you felt then. There's something healing and powerful about that. I think one reason Christians don't do it, Keith, is we think listening to somebody means we affirm somebody. We feel like we need to tell people all the time, you got this wrong about the Bible, you're wrong with this morally. I get criticism all the time. You have this person on, why didn't you correct this belief? I'm like, can you just see the big picture of what we're doing. No one wants me in a conversation like, You're wrong with this, you're wrong with that. It's just nobody wants that. That listening to understand is valuable. When we realize that listening doesn't mean you affirm someone, I think it frees us up to just really try to understand cognitively what someone thinks and emotively how they feel as best we can.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You've used the word empathy a few times, and a word that hasn't come up, but it is in the title of Tim's podcast, *Winsome Conviction*. I was thinking, as you said, sometimes we stay away from the idea of empathizing because we're fearful that that is affirming. Related, I think sometimes, because these words have fallen on some hard times lately amongst Christians, there is the fear that other Christians might think that I'm compromising because I'm not, as you

were saying, I'm not taking this abrasive, direct, constantly corrective attitude. Do you think that there is an element of even fear and peer pressure amongst us that, well, if I am to be gracious, other Christians might think that I am being weak-kneed, I'm being mealy-mouthed. There are some people who will practically say that. I mean, I watch some of the things that are going on in social media, and I'm just like, chagrined. But do you think that that is a factor?

Dr. Sean McDowell

This is a really interesting question. Why are we afraid to be gracious and kind with people? One reason, I think, is we don't have a ton of confidence about what we believe and why. Back to the atheist encounter. One thing I'll say to people, I'll say when I'm debriefing the dialogue. I'll say, Why did you get so defensive and so upset and hostile? I'll say, Maybe because a lot of you don't really know what you believe about the problem of evil. You don't know what you believe about God being triune. You don't know why you think there's evidence for intelligent design, and when I push back, you get defensive. If you have confidence in what you believe, then I'm just not threatened by somebody in their story and their experience the way that somebody else is. I think that could be a piece of it. There is a mob mentality. I've had conversations where people have just jumped on and criticized me like crazy. There's a defensiveness where I understand I'm like, I don't want to be accused of being too soft and have people come after me. I've probably given into too much at times.

Dr. Sean McDowell

I understand why somebody would say, I don't want to get too much criticism for this. But that's why I think clarity is just so important, more important today than it's ever been. If I'm clear about what I believe on issues of sexuality, that when I'm talking with somebody, I don't feel the need to push back on every single thing because I've been clear about what I believe. Now, some people still criticize, I can't control that. That's out of my hands. I'm not going to lose any sleep over that. But there's just a lot of words in the Bible about a gentle word turns away a wrath. In Proverbs 15, a soft spoken word breaks a bone. It's your kindness that leads to repentance. If somebody was going to say either Sean is too belligerent and harsh or Sean is just too kind with people, I'd take the kind charge any day.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's take a break here. On the other side of that, I want to move into some of the things that you get into in the second portion of the book in terms of practical tips.

Dr. Sean McDowell

Awesome.

Ben Best, co-host

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Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm back with Sean McDowell, and we are talking about the book that he co-authored with Tim Muehlhoff, *End the Stalemate*. It's a book about how to have potentially difficult conversation with the people with whom we disagree. I wanted to pick up with with some of the things that you identify in the second part of the book, Practical Tips for Engaging Others. You, in that section talk about a principle that you seek to operate by, and it is this, "show as much grace and charity as you can without violating your conscience." Could you expound on that a little?

Dr. Sean McDowell

Yeah, I think I might slightly amend that, as I would say. The way I frame it is I would say, I want to be as and charitable toward people as I can without violating my conscience or Scripture. Now, that should be obvious to people, but at least to Christians. But I emphasize that because our conscience is not the final bearer of whether something is right or wrong when it's all said and done. We can have seared consciences. In fact, we always have to bring our conscience back to Scripture itself. But my point being is I want to err, if I err anywhere, on the side of trying to be charitable toward people in their views, trying to be kind toward people, not misrepresenting them or what they believe, and is tied to Scripture and tied to my conscience. That's a principle that I operate by. Now, of course, we got to ask the question, what does that look like in situation A, B, C, and D? And we can flesh that out. But my principle is—and let me think about it this way, Keith, wouldn't you and I want somebody to do that with us? Wouldn't we want somebody to say, You know what? I'm going to be toward your argument, Sean, or toward who you are, Sean. I'm going to be as charitable as I can be. I would love somebody to do that. I have certain atheists in my life who just have canceled me and criticized me and gone after me. Then I have other atheists to say, I disagree with with you, but I actually see where you're coming from. I see your heart and I understand, and I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. That's the principle flipped on its head, so to speak. Whether Christian or atheist, let's be charitable people. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Now, if there comes a point where you

have to not be charitable anymore, then, of course, you get to that point. But that's how I try to approach things, and I think it's an example of golden rule.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. It always interests me how it is that when people speak of the importance of being charitable and kind and gentle, especially this is online, people immediately, almost like with a knee-jerk reaction, point to the counter-examples. Well, whether it's Jesus turning over tables or Paul saying, I wish that they would go emasculate themselves and so forth, and treat those as though they're the norm as opposed to they are exceptions. And certainly, they're strong language. There is very direct confrontational language. But it seems as though there's something out of kilter when we feel like we've got to make those the rule and almost kindness in a gentle way of speaking, that's the exception. Well, in that section, you We're going to talk about three steps from engaging-

Dr. Sean McDowell

Can I comment on that if it's okay with you?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Sure.

Dr. Sean McDowell

Look, I think there is a time in place for grace, and there's a time in place for truth. We need what might be called a more pastoral voice and what might be called a prophetic voice. We've always needed that. I also think some people are wired more prophetically, and some people are wired more just the grace and kindness approach. It's not better or worse, it's both. But certain times require one voice, whether it's cultural times or relational times. I mean, I've told people, I said, Look, there's a time to mock. Look at Elijah and the prophets of Baal. He mocked them. There's a time for this. Jesus modeled that. But this Jesus, and that was Elijah, as a whole, we are to be known by our love.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that's helpful. You give three steps for engaging people over controversial topics, and I found it helpful that in order to illustrate what this might look like, you applied them to the topic, one of the hot button topics that you mentioned earlier, critical race theory. These are the steps that you mentioned, approaching an issue for clarity, approaching an issue with charity,

approaching an issue critically. Now, some of these you have already touched on in various respects, but could you walk us through at that beginning with the importance of clarity? How is it that you recommend that we go about seeking to arrive at clear definitions and understanding of views with which we disagree?

Dr. Sean McDowell

You're right. We picked out one issue as an example here, but we could have taken abortion, we could have taken gun control, we could have taken immigration. It's really a pattern for engaging issues and people who see the world differently. So I wanted to come up with three Cs. Actually, I don't think I started there, but I ended up directing it there for memorability. The first one is clarity. So in other words, if you're engaging another position, let's be clear on what that person believes. Let's just understand it on its own merits first. Again, that's what I would want somebody with the view that I hold or with the Bible. Then the second step was engage the idea charitably. Instead of reading, say, the *Book of Mormon*, just looking for errors to prove it wrong, read it the same way I would want a skeptic to read the Bible. Read it charitably. Same with a book by somebody of a different political persuasion. Then third, so it's clarity, it's charity, it's Then the third one is critically. Of course, as Christians and human beings, we're supposed to engage ideas critically. Truth matters. But I think if we skip clarity, understand issue first, understanding it charitably, then we will be critical in a way of others' ideas and beliefs that we don't want them to be critical of our ideas and beliefs, which, frankly, is not a way of loving other people.

Dr. Sean McDowell

So part of this was, we let other people think for us so often. So this topic just happened to be critical race theory. Well, someone might listen to one person who's in favor of it or against it and say, You know what? That makes up my mind. I'm convinced. And I'm like, Okay, time out. This is a really important issue. There's a lot at stake here. I either say, You know what? I've listened to one person so far. Here's what they believe. It makes sense to me, but I'm still looking into it. Fine, that's reasonable. Or go read some original sources yourself clearly and charitably, and then formulate an opinion and listen to person A, but also somebody person B on the other side who sees things differently. That helps us arrive at truth. But the reason we don't is that takes effort. That takes time. It's much easier to let somebody somebody just make up my own mind for me.

Dr. Sean McDowell

And I'm not saying I've always done this, Keith. I know I haven't. But I would say when we take somebody's... When I hear somebody who disagrees me, I'm like, wow, they really represent in my view fairly. They understood the arguments for it and they disagree. There's a sense where I'm like, I'm honored that they took my ideas seriously, even though they differ. But I can't stand it when somebody attributes something to me. I'm like, that's not even what I'm saying. That's not what I mean. Well, if we don't like others to do that to us, we as Christians should not do that to other people and what they believe either.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. You talk about the difference between straw-manning and steel-manning and how important it is—And this is something that I tell our students in apologetics—how we represent someone else's ideas is part of our witness. It's part of whether or not we are acting with integrity, we are treating people with dignity, that we're taking time to listen. And we want people to leave us at least being willing to say, he disagrees with me vehemently, but he understands what I believe. I think that's so key. You and Tim, toward the end of the book, also model some of the principles that you bring out in the book in terms of some of the disagreements the two of you have on the topic of the use of gender pronouns. I thought that was a very helpful element of the book as well.

Dr. Sean McDowell

I don't remember whose idea that was. I think Tim has done that in the past in some of his other books. But we're like, if we're going to talk about disagreeing well, let's model it. We had some different perspectives on critical race theory, on a range of political issues, but was like, you know what? This is a sensitive timely topic. Let's model for people how to disagree graciously and thoughtfully, but firmly. We both have thoughtful opinions and convictions about this. We followed up with that and had a whole hour-long, maybe hour plus, I wouldn't call it a debate. I'd call it just a friendly substantive conversation on pronouns on YouTube to model for people how you can do this. And so I'm glad you found that helpful in the book. If people want to see it this out, so to speak, you could go to that on YouTube. But I would say one of the reasons I think that conversation worked is Tim and I have known each other for a long time. There's trust that's there. There's affection that is there. There's a relationship that is there. That's what helps conversations succeed. So a lot of the conversations I have on my YouTube channel, I've selected the kind of person who I think can engage in this conversation with me. So it's not like every single person anywhere would do this. There's a lot of people that won't. And I can't force somebody to have a good conversation if they're not willing to. But again, I think a lot of people, if you approach in the right way, can have a more thoughtful conversation.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I know that there is a website that is associated with the book, endthestalemate.com. What can people find there and how does it relate to the content of the book?

Dr. Sean McDowell

Yeah, Tim's whole team at the Winsome Convictions Project built this. The idea is, I don't find it that difficult to talk to most people, and I just forget how much I practice this, and I studied communications, and have good models of this. Tim is like, What if you make a website where people can practice this, actually interacting with, not a straw man, but genuine views of somebody, and they can practice and make mistakes and learn, and then go have the actual conversations. It's a very easy to use website where somebody you can plug in the perspective and worldview of the person you want to engage with, and then you just start going back and forth. Then you learn by doing it. That's the key. That's what End the Stalemate is for. Just learning on hand. Actually, Tim and I taught a weekend class at Biola on this this past fall. We modeled, again, our discussion on pronouns. And afterwards, I forget it, somebody in the class made a statement that was critical of Tim's view, and I think he compared it to cannibalism. And Tim was like, Okay, time out. You have totally poisoned the well. The moment you do this, what's anyone who says this is going to get defensive and going to get upset. Even if you're making a logically valid point, you've got to think a way to say this so it lands. So I said to him, this is in front of the whole class, I said, Okay, I think you're raising a fair question for Tim. I want you to reword it and rephrase it in a way that's going to advance the conversation. Help us understand each other better, understand the point rather than comparing it to cannibalism. And he tried a couple of times and got it. I was like, Now we're learning. The website is just to learn on hand and get better at this as you go. So then you have a little more confidence experience to try it in the real world.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that's a good idea. Wrapping up, I wanted to ask you something, and that is this. People see you on YouTube, they hear you on podcasts and talk, having these conversations. Do you ever experience nervousness as you're going into a situation like that? And what things do you pray for and about before you enter into a discussion like this?

Dr. Sean McDowell

I probably get somewhat nervous before every conversation that I have, whether it's just that the technology goes well, that the conversation will be helpful to people, that I'll be able to think on my feet. Every conversation, I don't know that I've ever said this publicly, but you started with

that engagement with Matthew Vines. I was actually incredibly nervous before that, in part because I'm straight, white, older male. He is a gay, younger male. So if it felt like I was too belligerent, the narrative is people like me beat up on people like him. I'm like, I can't be too belligerent or it's going to backfire. If I don't push enough, then I'm just saying, Hey, here's two views about how you interpret the Bible, both are equal. Well, that's not okay. And he's smart. I mean, he went to Harvard. He makes some good arguments. So I just had to find a way where I pushed back in a way that was respectful, kept the conversation I wanted Matthew to really feel like I cared for him because I do. And so balancing that was easier said than done. One of the ways I deal with nervousness is I pray, I say, God, just prepare my heart, help me love this person and be faithful to you in the conversation. I also prep. I mean, that's one of the best ways to get ready is to prepare when you know your stuff, some of that nervousness goes away.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Right. Well, we have scratched the surface, but I hope it's given people an idea of what they can find in the book. Again, the title of the book is *End the Stalemate: Move Past Cancel Culture to Meaningful Conversations* by Sean Dowell and Tim Muehlhoff. Sean, thank you for the work that you're doing, for the example that you are, for taking the time to talk with us today. Really grateful for you.

Dr. Sean McDowell

Keith, thanks for such wonderful questions. You obviously read the book. You've thought about this, and these are the questions that advance the ball. So I'm taking notes and hoping I do the same thing when I interview others. Well done. It was a privilege to be on.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Thank you. Take care.

Ben Best, co-host

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