

Five tips for having a rewarding Christian dialogue with an "adversary"

By [Janet Edwards](#)

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I love having a good conversation with someone who disagrees with me. Over the years, I've had hundreds of these types of conversations - mostly with colleagues in the church who disagree with me about the place of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender faithful.

Though I don't know many people who share my joy in opening up a dialogue with those who they might call their "adversaries," I believe those conversations are critically important for us to have. This is especially true if we are to better understand and eventually open our neighbors' minds to the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in our churches.

So, with the hope that this will inspire you to pick up the phone, and invite someone you currently think of as an "adversary" to talk, I'd like to offer five tips on opening up a rewarding Christian dialogue with a person in disagreement with you.

1. Approach the other person as a beloved child of God. See Christ in the eyes of the other person. Set aside every presumption you may have about him or her except that God loves this other, just like God loves you. This is often a mystery for me that our talk with help solve.
2. Trust deeply that the Holy Spirit has a word for you both. Watch carefully for the gift God has for you in your exchange with this other. It probably will not be the same gift for both of you. It will most likely be a still, small voice so you must listen hard for it.

3. Try hard to see things from the other's point of view. Ask questions like: "This is what I hear you saying, is that correct?" or: "I want to make sure I get what you mean, is this what you said?" My own convictions have been strengthened many times by testing them against the other's heartfelt words.
4. Watch for those things upon which you both agree and highlight them. This can often lead to some struggle because being in agreement is foreign to us and we resist it. Still, it can be very healing to get up at the end of your conversation to go your different ways having acknowledged some things upon which you agree. It's also a great way to start an ongoing dialogue. Can we agree that our goal is Loving God, or Loving Neighbor? These are the seeds from which further discussion can blossom.
5. The goal is to keep the conversation going. Talking shouldn't be seen as a means to an end. Talking is a sole purpose in and of itself. For this reason, I often do not share my position with the other person (Its well known anyway). I simply take in what the other is saying and seek the best way to prompt another response from the other by sharing of my self or asking a question that has occurred to me.

There is one crucial dynamic in all of these tips required to make this work: Nothing that the other says to you is about you personally. The other person speaks only from his or her ideas and so you need not take anything that person says as true about you. I am often disappointed and challenged by what the other says but I am usually not hurt or angered by it.

I pray for that same godly protection for you as you join in a conversation that I hear God calling us all to.

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