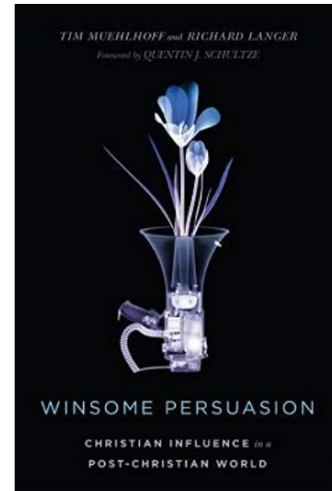


Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer, **Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World**, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017, 190 pp., \$19.80 (paperback).

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Dialogue and persuasion across societal divides can be arduous as well as ineffective if not done with consideration and forethought. Christians may find it difficult to effectively communicate persuasively, especially when they feel their values and identity are at stake. Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer address this challenge in **Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World**. These authors, a communication scholar and a theologian, provide insight and advice to Christians as they participate in public engagement. These authors challenge common Christian attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, and rhetorical practices.



The book is sectioned into three parts along with an introduction and concluding remarks. The introduction informs the reader of what Muehlhoff and Langer perceive as the problem with societal discourse and how Christian discourse must adopt an exemplary “persuasive voice,” which arguably is what “winsome persuasion” means. They argue winsome persuasion involves appeals to the common good and general revelation; seeking to change viewpoints or practices within the culture and appeals to the conscience and shared values; and seeking progressive steps toward a final goal. Winsome persuasion is, more or less, analogous to the Holy Spirit bearing witness (John 15:26–27) and restraining evil (2 Thessalonians 2:6–7; p. 6). The authors then lay out their agenda by stating, “We write this book in the hopes of helping Christians engage in helpful and constructive public conversations—even when talking to people with whom we radically disagree” (p. 7).

The first part follows the introduction and is the theoretical backbone of the book. The first two chapters (chapters 1 and 2) in this part work on defining counterpublics, and more specifically Christian counterpublics. The next two chapters (chapters 3 and 4) describe what it is like to be a Christian counterpublic in our current “argument culture” and how Christians can effectively establish credibility.

The second part focuses on the persuasive messages Christians are trying to send. The authors mention the dual nature of both creating (chapter 5) and delivering the message (chapter 6). In the last chapter of this section (chapter 7), the authors argue that Christian counterpublics should contribute to their community’s social capital (or available resources) by forming partnerships with non-Christian publics.

In the third section, the authors offer a practical application of the previous sections. Both authors give their perspective on how Christian counterpublics should respond to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage. Chapter 8 presents Muehlhoff’s perspective while chapter 9 presents Langer’s. These views are then compared and contrasted through a guided discussion in the last chapter (chapter 10). The

conclusion reaffirms the value of the book, reminding readers of the principles covered and encouraging them to patiently pursue their goals.

Muehlhoff and Langer have the formidable task of convincing Christians to change their rhetorical style and participate with people who hold drastically different perspectives. To influence Christians to adopt their suggestions, the authors must use persuasive tactics themselves. The strongest aspects of the book derive from the authors' abilities to construct a valid argument interwoven throughout their narrative by providing claims which are supported by evidence, warrants, and refutation.

First, the authors position themselves in the larger narrative of the book. This positioning is advantageous for readers because it helps project where the authors' biases are located within the arguments they make. Likewise, it helps the authors gain credibility with an already skeptical audience. Muehlhoff and Langer position themselves as opinion leaders in the Christian community, allowing readers to grapple with their expertise in both communication and theology. Their "insider" authorship may make their arguments easier for Christians to read, absorb, and apply since Christians will understand the authors as one of their own instead of, for instance, a non-Christian telling them how to be more persuasive.

The second strength of the book is the harmonious balance between the types of support the authors introduce to readers. Often, books written by Christian authors for Christian audiences tend to focus primarily on biblical Scripture and Christian writings to support their points. Unfortunately, relying on this type of evidence renders any argument unpersuasive to non-Christians. Muehlhoff and Langer strike a balance between the evidence they bring to the conversation. They not only mention Scripture and other Christian writings, but they also bring in principles from various academic disciplines like communication and psychology, such as inoculation theory. Most of their opinions and claims are supported through a vast array of sources, which enhances their credibility and the soundness of their suggestions. They also include practical examples to demonstrate the principles at work. These examples help make the concepts and advice more relatable. The authors, at the same time, take time to address counterarguments. They seriously address them and offer refutation, which strengthens their position.

Despite its strengths, Muehlhoff and Langer's book contains weaknesses primarily rooted in their assumptions and the language they use. Taken out of context, the book and its components, suggestions, and arguments are ones found in almost any foundations of oral communication textbook. The authors discuss principles like the rhetorical situation and rhetorical appeals to showcase how Christians should think about, among other things, arrangement and delivery. Unfortunately, situating principles of communication in an explicitly Christian context may make the book less accessible and more controversial.

To begin, the authors outline what it means for a group to be considered a counterpublic and then go about proving Christians are a counterpublic. However, in these first two chapters of the book, there seems to be confirmation bias toward Christians being a counterpublic rather than analyzing whether this group actually is one. Before the second chapter even begins its examination, the authors are already calling Christians a counterpublic. Yet, they do not explain how Christian groups meet the three criteria for being a counterpublic outlined in the first chapter (opposition, withdrawal, and engagement). Thus, from the beginning of the book, the authors perpetuate an "us" versus "them" scenario which may not even exist in

the first place. Additionally, the label of counterpublic is unnecessary. Christians do not need to be labeled as a counterpublic, and indeed may not be at all, to utilize the suggestions made throughout the book. Thus, the authors marginalize Christians when they do not need to do any of this work to make their arguments about persuasion.

The second weakness is the lack of persuasive theory throughout the book. Although the authors imbue each chapter with general theoretical underpinnings from communication, sociology, and psychology, specific attention to persuasive theory is absent. For a book about persuasion, it seems reticent to include such theoretical frameworks. The authors focus more on rhetorical basics than persuasion itself. This focus leaves readers with a basic understanding of how to engage others and deliver a message but shortchanges them on persuasive theory. Therefore, if the aim of Muehlhoff and Langer is to simply help Christians become better public speakers and interpersonal communicators, they have provided a valuable text. But, if their aim is to help Christians understand persuasion, they are less successful.

Muehlhoff and Langer's *Winsome Persuasion* encourages Christians to communicate in a world where many may oppose their beliefs, by using persuasion accurately informed by theory and practice. The book has some faults which are not entirely outweighed by its strengths. However, the book is a resource for Christians who are interested in changing the rhetoric of their message and the influence they have in their communities. *Winsome Persuasion* is recommended for Christian individuals and groups as well as undergraduate classes in religion and communication. It is unlikely to meet the needs of persuasive communication classes, especially those at the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels. Holistically, the authors have achieved their goal "to spark a conversation about how to best present a perspective that is increasingly becoming the minority view" (p. 9) but perhaps only among Christian audiences.