

LEADER CONVERSATION GUIDE

# How to Talk About Faith “Non-Essentials” (with Pastor Dave Dummitt) – Episode 346

## *How to Talk About the Tough Stuff (Part 4)*

“Discussing the non-essentials ought to help you make disciples, not hinder you from making disciples.”

In this episode, Pastor Dave Dummitt from [Willow Creek Community Church](#) joins us to discuss exploring tough topics as a church and navigating non-essentials in our faith.

### *Interview with Dave Dummitt*

**Can you remember back to your early days of teaching and share your experience from the first time you had to teach on a tough topic? What did you learn from that experience?**

- When I first started teaching, my team told me that I needed to talk on giving. I tried to do my best to put together a great teaching, but I fumbled all over it. I was apologetic, I was pulling punches, and I was teaching it like it was a necessary evil in the church rather than something to be celebrated, or a privilege to be able to partner with God in the mission.
- I remember someone coming up to me afterwards and saying, “When you pull punches on God’s truth, you’re denying people some of the blessing of living in God’s truth.”
- There are things that are challenging to talk about but if we really believe that what we're teaching is God’s truth, we don’t want to pull punches. We want it to be something that we put out there and allow people to live in God’s truth, because that’s the best place to be.
- I recently learned that the Hebrew word for “commandment” is rooted in the word “connection.” So it’s the idea that God’s laws were actually God’s connections—his truth was really the way to keep us close to him. So when I think about teaching God’s truth, even the hard truth, it’s because we want to be so close relationally to Jesus and God.

**What would you say are the most tension-filled topics today either for congregations or pastors? Do you think those topics have shifted over time?**

- It seems like the tough topics of years ago were around the finer points of Orthodox theology. Today it feels like the controversial things that are tough topics revolve more around our engagement as a church with culture (sexuality, gender, etc.) Also just topics like political engagement, mental health, etc.

### **Do you prepare any differently for those messages? Do you prepare your team? If so, how?**

- I write messages with a team of people and we have tried to have diverse voices around the table. We have different ethnicities represented, different generations, men and women, etc. so we consider what those topics look like from different perspectives.
- The bigger the challenge that we're addressing, the longer lead time of work we do discipling people in off-stage environments. So, if we're going to address sexuality and gender at Willow, we are first working to disciple leaders, donors, small groups, staff, etc.
- Before I'm challenging our whole community, I want to try and roll that out so that when people hear it from the stage, 60-80% of people have already heard it. I don't want the stage to be the place where we're shocking people.
- I also try to prepare my heart every week because I think our posture is more important than the position. How much do I love and care about the people who struggle with these issues we're discussing? My posture needs to be the same posture that Jesus had.
- I coach our teaching team to imagine three people in the crowd: Someone that's hurting (compassion), someone that's skeptical (clarity), and someone that really likes you (calm).

### **How do you approach those tense moments as a teacher with those three people in mind?**

- If I sense that it's getting tense, I try to acknowledge it: "It's getting tense. These are hard things to talk about." I also try to resonate with it: "These are tough topics for me too." I just try to be compassionate for people who are struggling with things in the room.
- I use that response as fuel to realize maybe this isn't a topic for us to avoid. This might be a topic we need to lean into—maybe we need to pepper this into more messages or maybe we need to be doing more discipling in this area off in non-stage environments.

### **How can we help people balance truth and love in the context of their relationships?**

- First, let's all realize that the algorithms of our favorite socials are trying to feed us. We're all kind of in an echo chamber, so be very careful trying to catch a vision or an understanding of what "normal" is or what "everybody" thinks from social media.
- Do your best to try and get outside of whatever the echo chambers are, the people that are not like you, don't look like you, don't vote like you, maybe don't even believe like you, but to try and have relationship and develop a muscle of empathy that says, "I may not have the same position as this person, but I really want to try and understand their perspective."
- I'm really working on trying to get people around tables that can give me a better perspective. And I think asking questions more than you talk is just really practical advice.

### **What's your advice to help people face and even live with some tension around non-essentials?**

- It was Augustine who first said, "In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, and in all things, charity or love."
- We don't need unity of opinion around non-essentials, but we do need unity of mission.
- I think it's great for us to debate these topics in our community if it helps us, but if it begins to negatively affect your mission of reaching people for Jesus and making disciples, then that's a good barometer of whether or not you're doing it right.
- Discussing the non-essentials ought to help you make disciples, not hinder you from making disciples.

### **I think there's a myth that you have to avoid teaching on tough topics if you want to reach more people. What's your reaction to that?**

- Young people care about these issues. You're not turning them away by talking about these things, you're helping to disciple them.
- I think most folks would say their mission is building a church, not a crowd. So although our weekends are one of the most public things we do, it's still part of that discipling process. You're trying to help people take next steps, so you have to talk about things that matter to people and that are relevant.
- I don't think you avoid the hard things. I think you just have to be really strategic and intentional and compassionate about how you address them.

### **Any final encouragement you want to give pastors as they are preparing and delivering messages on the tough topics in today's culture?**

- God cares more about discipling the people in your church and reaching your community than you do. So when you're trying to prepare that message and trying to get it just right, you might feel so alone, but you are not—God is right there helping you. He's also right there with you in the delivering of it.
- We're not supposed to do this on our own either. We have a content creation team, but if you're in a smaller context, reach out to other pastors. You don't have to do this alone.

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