

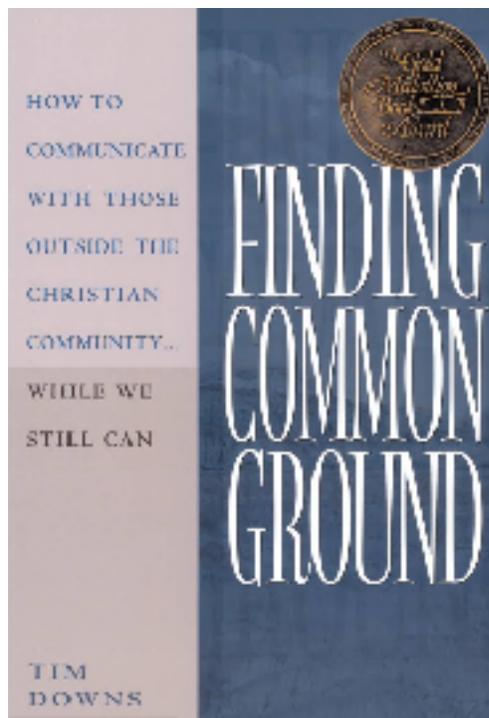
## Finding Common Ground: How to communicate with those outside the Christian community...while we still can.

By Tim Downs. Moody, 1999.

Book review by Warwick Alcock, Director of Strategic Operations.

*That sower and reaper may rejoice together* — Jn 4.36

We reap what we sow. Author Tim Downs is a former comic strip artist who founded a communication and consulting ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ (now CRU). In his book, *Finding Common Ground*, the author draws a helpful distinction between harvesting (i.e. evangelism -- leading someone to Christ) and sowing (finding common ground with non-Christians so the gospel can be heard when the time is ripe). We need to sow, says Downs, and the consequences are tragic if we don't. He refers to the parable of the soil, in which he likens the soil to the whole environment: the culture, the atmosphere, the *zeitgeist* -- the spirit of the time in which we live. Christians cannot sow the gospel effectively if they do not understand the soil with which they are working. We need to be effective in fostering a receptive environment in which the gospel has a chance, in good time, of taking root. Unless this generation learns to sow, we'll be less fruitful than we could be, and the next generation may have little to reap.



In our Christian culture we lack a Biblical understanding of the virtue of sowing. We haven't paid attention to it because it's not exciting, like harvesting. "Go where God is at work", we say, as if God is only interested in spiritual hot spots where harvesters are reaping, and has abandoned people in the vast, dark, in-between spaces to the Devil. When Christians retreat from spiritual cold spots where we invest nothing, our post-Christian culture recedes from us, eroding and becoming more hostile — and we're left with a vicious circle. However, as followers of Christ we cannot withdraw from a culture that needs to be redeemed. Let's remind ourselves that while Isaiah was a harvester who saw results, Jeremiah was a sower who did not. And the 400-year period between the Testaments? A time of sowing, rather than harvesting. God was in the quiet, unnoticed, behind-the-scenes work of preparing a culture to receive the gospel. Sowing is just as important to God as harvesting.

How does a culture change? As followers of Christ, we must sow into philosophy, the arts, popular music, politics, business — and thus into the general culture. None of these facets of our culture will be redeemed by an occasional visitor. It takes an investment of Christian lives, callings and careers into all institutions of our society.

So what should we be doing differently? Downs outlines these steps:

1. **Revalue the role of the sower.** Help new Christians understand that both sowing and harvesting are options. Let's equip and encourage those who choose to sow with the same enthusiasm and zeal we would any other aspiring missionary.
2. **Teach people in our churches how to sow:** how to cultivate, plant and nurture the soil of our culture. We must provide resources for sowing so that later we can harvest.
3. **Train our youth in the basic skills of sowing.** Help our children understand the role of the sower at a very young age -- before being trained as a harvester.
4. **Sow strategically.** Sow into film schools and invest in news anchors. Let's seek out potential Wilberforces of the future. Our need of such people — especially right now! — is just as urgent and legitimate as our need of more traditional missionaries.
5. **Create support structures for sowers.** Host fellowships of sowers in common fields where they can meet, challenge and encourage each other. Commission sowers and extend to them invitations as guest speakers.
6. **Prepare for the long haul.** This means dedicating one's life to the task, because culture change for gospel purposes does not happen overnight. It's a slow, long-term process. It's possible that we may never know the results of this kind of ministry in our generation, but we'll be sowing so that later there is a harvest to reap.

This book includes excellent, practical examples of what to stop doing, and what to do differently: stop trying to harvest where we should be sowing, and start tending the soil where people are not yet ready for the gospel. Those gifted for sowing rather than harvesting will be encouraged to know that their quiet but intentional influences amongst non-Christians in the common ground of their everyday lives are a vitally important part of the Great Commission. They deserve to be acknowledged and better equipped. This book helps us see how we can make that happen. Ultimately we need a strategic alliance of harvesters and sowers as Jesus originally intended, so that one day *the sower and the reaper may rejoice together*.