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### How Liberals and Conservatives Think

All language is metaphor. When conservatives talk about politics, they use words like character, virtue, discipline, toughness, self-reliance, authority, heritage, and hard work. Liberals use words like social responsibility, human rights, concern, care, help, health, dignity, and diversity.

George Lakoff is a linguist who has studied political discourse in America. He concludes that conservatives are often an enigma to liberals and liberal are an enigma to conservatives because they use different language and metaphors. They might as well be from different planets.

At the center of the conservative world view is a strict father model with the “father having primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the authority to set ... policy and ... rules.” At the center of the liberal worldview is a nurturing parent model where “love, empathy and nurturance are primary and children become responsible, self-disciplined and self-reliant through being cared for, respected and caring for others.”

Over the past 25 years, the conservatives have put a lot of money into conservative think tanks that have developed the language being used in today’s political discourse. Lakoff argues that once the language framing an issue is set, the debate is over. Take the phrase “tax revolt.” The metaphor of revolt implies oppression. Our sympathies naturally go to the underdog. The debate is over. If the issue of taxation were framed as “paying our dues,” the outcome would be very different.

As the political season heats up, George Lakoff offers a great deal of insight as to how liberals can better understand and speak to the conservative mind set (and vice versa) and to how we might be more skillful in how we discuss the issues before us. Until we understand how someone thinks, we won’t be able to enter into a meaningful discourse.

The name of his book is *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2002). Ministers will find the core of a sermon in every chapter.

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