

ENDORSEMENTS

I doubt there's ever been a more important time for a book that teaches us the art of listening. The rise of tribalism—both in the world and in the church—has made it increasingly difficult for us to really hear one another. If we want things to change, we simply must do better. Thankfully, Brian Davies's new book teaches not only why we should listen but, more importantly, also how to actually do it. I pray we all take its lessons to heart and put them into practice.

**Scott Christenson, senior pastor,
St. Paul's Lutheran Church and School, Orange, California**

In a world that is always going from one thing to the next, Brian invites us to slow down and be present. Through Scripture and story, he reminds us that if we want to love like Jesus, we should listen like Jesus. *Captivating Conversations* encourages us to create deeper relationships as we reclaim the art of listening. This is a book I wish I had read years ago but am thankful to have it now!

**Tanner Olson, poet, speaker,
and author of *Continue: Poems and Prayers of Hope***

If you do not want to be challenged by a book, you should not read this one. Why? It opens the Scriptures, reveals not only the identity of Jesus but also how He engages the people He was sent to save with purposeful questions. You will learn about Jesus from Jesus. Pastor Davies invites us to be more curious about Jesus and one another. You will be challenged to go beyond superficial conversations with better questions and deeper listening. Davies's advice is practical, intentional, down to earth, and given in such a way we can all apply it—I know I will. Every church worker, lay leader, and disciple of Jesus, this book is worthy of your time and attention!

Rev. Dr. Allan R. Buss, president, Northern Illinois District, LCMS

Amid the cacophony of our culture's opposing voices, what if you and I choose to communicate differently? What could happen if we stop speaking divisively or talking over one another; if we pursue personal engagement, longing to listen more than hungering to be

heard? What if we ask thoughtful questions with an earnest desire to learn and understand others better? According to Brian Davies, in his insightful and timely new book, bridges can be built, relationships repaired, communities engaged, understanding gained—and more.

In *Captivating Conversations*, receive a perceptive cultural premise regarding the current state of conflict in many of our conversations. Learn from the eye-opening example of Jesus, the master communicator, through His perfect work and words. Jesus' thoughtful questions invite people to draw near, self-reflect, and discover divine truth. Engage in several exercises and receive special techniques that will prepare you (as they have me!) for thoughtful conversations that include purposeful, specific questions to ask others, all while emulating the Savior, by God's grace. You will find yourself reading and referencing this excellent resource again and again!

Deb Burma, Christian speaker and author of several books, including *Joy: A Study of Philippians; Leaning on Jesus; and Be Still and Know*

We've all been there—too quick to speak, too slow to listen, mouths open for inserting feet. Pastor Davies offers a biblically grounded, thoroughly practical corrective to our world of “shout first, ask questions later.” Not only will this book help you reclaim the lost art of listening but it will also help you look at life and ministry differently. The caustic vitriol of our fallen and falling humanity can only be effectively countered by the Gospel of Christ and by His forgiven and freed saints who open their sanctified ears to a world in need.

Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Leininger, pastor, First Saint Paul's, Chicago

Brian's writing style is engaging and easy to read, making it a pleasure. The very first chapter immediately addresses an issue we all deal with: polarization. This relevance to our current challenges is sure to resonate with you. We are encouraged to be active listeners. In every chapter, you will find solid biblical teaching, practical examples, and thought-provoking questions to engage you further. This will make a great addition to your personal library and a great book to discuss with church staff and board members.

Rev. Dr. B. Keith Haney, assistant to the president for missions, human care, and stewardship, Iowa District West, LCMS

CAPTIVATING CONVERSATIONS



How Christians Can Reclaim
the Lost Art of Listening

B R I A N K . D A V I E S



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INTRODUCTION

IT WAS 2:47 a.m., and my phone was ringing.

Because I serve not only as a pastor to a church but also as a chaplain for a local fire department, I sleep with my phone next to me so I can respond to emergencies. And let me tell you, even though I've had my fair share of middle-of-the-night calls, they still startle me. It often takes my brain a few minutes to wake up and adjust. (Shout-out to the first responders who do this every day!)

This call was from the dispatcher of the fire department. I was being called to a scene. I was provided an address and headed out, knowing very little about what was ahead. I said a prayer while I drove and trusted that the Lord would use me there.

I arrived on the scene, a house where a multigenerational family lived. I was briefed that the matriarch had just passed away. I was asked to provide comfort to the family, which was understandably in shock and distress. As I walked into the house, I thought about my own grandmother, Else, who lived with us until she passed away when I was 13. These are such good memories.

The whole family was packed into the kitchen. Some were sitting at a round table. Others were standing, making

an already tight room feel cramped. In the room were two generations: a smattering of children of the woman who had just passed and some of her grandchildren. I introduced myself and quickly determined that there was a language barrier. The oldest English-speaking grandchild, a woman in her early twenties, was my primary point of contact with the family.

And then I made a mistake.

It was early in the morning, remember, and my brain was still waking up. But still, I made a mistake.

After I made brief introductions and expressed words of condolence, I said, “You must have been close to your grandmother.” I didn’t know that I had stepped into something as the words came out of my mouth, but I sure figured it out when this young woman replied, “No. Actually, we weren’t. My grandmother developed dementia in her old age and became very difficult to live with.”

Thoughts began running through my mind: *Well, good morning. Regroup. Shift gears. Let’s turn this around.*

My mistake in that moment was asking a question that assumed an answer. I projected my own experience onto theirs, believing that life with their grandmother in that home was like mine had been without first learning what their experience was like. And because my assumption was incorrect, it added awkwardness to an already awkward situation. After all, their loved one had just passed away, and a strange guy who spoke a different language was talking to them at their kitchen table.

I quickly began asking questions that assumed no answers. Then I simply listened. I took a posture of curiosity

about their matriarch. Over the next hour or so, they shared, mostly through the oldest granddaughter, memories of their grandmother and mother. I heard stories. They cried and laughed as they remembered what life was like before she had dementia. It was really, really neat to hear about their family and spend time with them. At intervals, I felt less like a visitor and more like an observer as they regaled one another with memories. It was a holy moment.

As our conversation neared an end, the oldest granddaughter paused, gathered herself, and shared this incredibly meaningful affirmation with me: “I’m so glad you came to be with us. It means a lot to us that you were here. You’re a really good listener.” (It appeared that I had recovered from my opening line debacle!)

I share this story to launch this book because, first, it’s an example of what’s happening all over the place in human relationships—missteps in conversation that create barriers to deeper understanding. Second, it illustrates the power of how being open, curious, and inquisitive builds and strengthens relationships and how that, in turn, establishes a solid foundation for ministry, teaching, and witnessing to the work of Christ in our lives.

For the last few years, I’ve been on a journey of sorts. I’ve been observing what’s happening in culture, and since you’re reading this book, I’m guessing you have as well. Here’s what I see: people talking over and at one another, animosity and discord increasing with everyone hopelessly on one side or another. It doesn’t feel good, and it for sure doesn’t feel *right*.

I've also been on the lookout for moments that seem to be the way things *can* be—times when people seek to understand before seeking to be understood, when people listen without interrupting and ask questions rather than share opinions. I've seen in others and felt in myself the benefits of genuine listening and of being listened to.

I've also come to see that this theme is all over the Bible and central to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Think about it this way: if there was ever anyone who should walk around and tell people what to do, it was Jesus. Yet many times, that's not what He did. From very early on in His ministry, Jesus employed the art of asking good questions as a means to build bridges with people. I spent some time recording and counting His questions. I also observed that, when people asked questions of Him, Jesus used those moments as opportunities to spark further understanding and inspire curiosity rather than stifle discovery. He asked questions to initiate conversations, point people to God, rebuke His hearers, and test their understanding of Scripture. His questions had purpose.

So let me ask these questions to get you thinking: How many questions do you think Jesus asked in His earthly ministry? How many do you think He Himself answered? (Think about it for a moment.)

You might be surprised to learn that in biblical accounts of His ministry, Jesus asked more than three hundred questions, and He directly answered fewer than ten! Whoa! So, to make a Jesus-like move here and ask some probing questions, what do you make of this? Why do you think Jesus asked so many questions?

The book in your hands explores this.

Our culture promotes one-sided dialogue, combative language, and adversarial conversation. So, instead of following these worldly communication styles, our model for conversation should be the one Jesus gives us. In other words, we should build communication bridges with others so we can develop genuine relationships, elicit mutual respect, earn trust, learn about the vast and complex world our Creator has placed us in, and set our minds on the things of God.

In a world bustling with noise, where information flows endlessly and opinions clash constantly, the art of listening seems to have faded into obscurity. Yet amid the cacophony of voices is a timeless truth, a key to profound understanding and transformative relationships. At the heart of this truth is Jesus, whose approach to communication defied convention and captivated hearts. He, the wisest person to walk the earth, harnessed the might of questions to bridge gaps, awaken souls, and facilitate transformations, all so He might draw people to Himself, “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). As we embark on a journey of discovery into the significance of listening and learning, we are poised to uncover the essence of human connection and personal growth to build up our relationships with others and live in harmony with one another as God calls us to do.

Imagine standing on the dusty roads of ancient Galilee as Jesus walks among His disciples and the crowds that gather to hear Him speak. A sense of awe and anticipation fills the air. Jesus’ words, delivered with divine power and

wisdom, resonate deeply with His listeners because they are the very words of God. His monologues are recorded in Scripture to leave a lasting impression on us today.

Jesus' use of questions set Him apart as a communicator of unparalleled caliber. As we explore the depth of His interactions, we find that His questions were not merely techniques for eliciting information; they were pathways to the human heart, gateways to introspection, and catalysts for profound change. Jesus used dialogue that invited others to reflect, engage, and discover divine truth. His inquiries stirred the intellect and kindled the spirit, sparking conversations that transcended the surface and delved into the core of existence.

Beautifully and masterfully, Jesus asked questions that invited people to confront their own realities—their sinful nature and inability to do anything about it on their own. Through these interactions, He not only revealed His own divine knowledge and wisdom but He also opened the door and created space for transformation through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' conversational approach was already evident in His childhood, as described in the Gospel of Luke. At the age of 12, He engaged the teachers in the temple with questions that astonished and impressed them. This pattern of using questions as a means of facilitating dialogue and learning would continue throughout His ministry, leaving an indelible mark on His followers and the generations that followed.

As we examine Jesus' words in the Bible, we must confront pressing questions about our own approach to

conversation: How often do we prioritize listening? In a world entranced by rapid-fire information, do we pause to truly hear the voices around us? Are we engaging in conversations that encourage reflection, empathy, and growth?

The power of questions lies not only in their ability to unravel the mysteries of others—their thoughts, attitudes, perspectives, and motives—but also in their potential to break down barriers and unlock doors in order to reshape our communities, strengthen our relationships, and transform our perspectives. By adopting a posture of genuine openness and curiosity, we open the way to understanding viewpoints that differ from our own. We become active participants in communication, weaving threads of connection that transcend barriers and biases.

This book exists to help us reclaim the art of listening, to revive the power and potential of asking questions that cut through the noise and touch the soul. Imagine the impact we can create when we use questions to uplift those we love, encourage our neighbors, and foster a climate of open dialogue in our communities. The possibilities are many—strengthened relationships, a more connected society, and a more profound understanding of our shared human journey. This is surely a God-pleasing effort to engage with, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can!

Dear reader, as we embark on this exploration into the art of listening, learning, and questioning, let us embrace the legacy of the ultimate communicator and relationship-builder, Jesus. As we'll see, our Savior beautifully models a healthy posture we can and should take with others. Let us challenge ourselves to be mindful of the questions we

ask and the manner in which we listen. Let us recognize that every conversation, by the power of the Holy Spirit, holds the potential to ignite a spark of change, not only in others but also within ourselves.

In the chapters that follow, we will delve deeper into the art of questioning, explore techniques to enhance our interactions, inspire introspection, and foster growth. Through anecdotes, insights, and practical exercises, we will uncover how listening and engaging with intention can pave the way for deeper relationships and the enrichment of our communities. We'll see how Jesus does this and how we can follow His commands to love God above all and to love others as we love ourselves.

Imagine a world where disagreements are opportunities for understanding, where conversations are vehicles for growth, and where questions are the keys to unlocking profound insights. Such a world is not a fantasy; it is a possibility within our reach. Through the potent blend of listening and questioning, we, through the power of the Holy Spirit, have the potential to reshape our communities, one conversation at a time.

So are you ready to embark on this journey of discovery? Are you prepared to explore the treasures of understanding and connection? Let's take this journey together, for within the art of listening and learning lies an important secret that can revolutionize our lives and our world.

Here's the overview of what's in your hands.

The first part is a survey of the landscape around us and Jesus' approach to communication. The second part is a practical look at how listening well is not just a series

of skills; it's a mindset shift and an attitude and posture we take toward others.

Putting this attitude into practice will result in you being a better listener, having richer and more meaningful conversations, and developing stronger and healthier relationships. Even better, these practices may heal strained relationships, introduce people to Jesus, and draw others closer to Him.

Here's a quick word on how I've structured this book and why.

Captivating Conversations: How Christians Can Reclaim the Lost Art of Listening is a series of short chapters divided into four sections. (As a reader, I find that shorter chapters are easier to digest.) You can read this book from the beginning straight through to the end. Or you can read the chapters that appeal to you and your situation in the moment, and then go back to read the chapters you skipped at another time.

In fact, let me be so bold as to say this: if you actually want to start by reading sections III and IV, then go back and read I and II, this book will still make sense. It will kind of be like starting with the main story and then diving into the prequel!

Whichever way you choose to read it, I recommend reading this book with other people. We are wired and created by God for community, and if you read this with others, you can discuss and practice together the habits and skills I propose. If you are reading this book as part of a book club or a small group, I recommend meeting several times throughout the reading. Each chapter includes

questions for conversation and reflection. The more time you take with the chapters and questions, the more you will process the content, internalize it, and apply it. So please accept my invitation to slow down. The goal of *Captivating Conversations* isn't merely to finish; the goal is to get something out of it that impacts and blesses your life and relationships. Discussing and reflecting on the questions in this book will facilitate that.

However you read this book—on your own or with a group, straight through or by changing the order of the chapters—may this book enrich your relationships and move you to listen more closely to God's Word.

Happy reading (and listening)!



PART I

Hey, Culture. How's It Going?
(There Has to Be a Better Way)





CHAPTER 1

Why do you call Me “Lord, Lord,”
and not do what I tell you?

JESUS; LUKE 6:46



BRITTANY HAD HAD ENOUGH

LET'S START THIS chapter with a few questions. From what we've just learned in the introduction, this is what Jesus would do, right? So here goes:

- 🗣️ **How would you describe the level of discourse among humans in our culture these days?**
- 🗣️ **What do you observe as people interact with one another?**

Think about these questions for a moment. As you do, here's a quick story:

Brittany cuts my hair, and she is awesome. I wish you could meet her. She's talented, thoughtful, and kind. She's also a good listener; after all, when it's your vocation to be a stylist, you learn how to interact with clients. But by late fall of 2020, she had had enough. I couldn't tell by her disposition toward me and my family (she remained positive and cheerful), but I could tell by the glass jar in her salon with a label that read, "If you say the words *COVID*, *mask*, or *vaccine*, put \$20 in this jar." After months

of hearing clients riff on these subjects, Brittany wanted to talk about something else.

My observation is that many of us feel like Brittany these days. We've had enough of debating, talking over one another, and feeling like we just can't agree. And I'm not just talking about how the world should have (or could have) handled the pandemic, but about how the world should handle anything—the economy, the political landscape, guns, books, whether the toilet paper unrolls from under the roll or from the top.

Our culture has become increasingly *polarized* and *tribal*. There seems to be little room for nuance, little room for a moderate, middle-ground approach to mediating complex issues. Like the positive and negative terminals on a battery, people are on opposite sides and seem unable, or unwilling, to come together.

This results in heightened levels of *tribalism*. The word *tribalism* describes people interacting with or being in relationship with only those who think like them. Additionally, those within the tribe celebrate being in contempt of “the other” and view people outside their tribe as threats. Tribalism leaves little room for healthy discourse, listening, curiosity, collaboration, and learning.

We see this on both macro and micro levels. On a macro level, we see tribalism in our political and cultural leaders. It's the air we breathe. It's all around us. It seems unavoidable. On a micro level, tribalism is in our relationships, workplaces, churches, and even around our kitchen table. The memes and late-night television jokes about family meals being things to avoid because of divergent political

or social views may make us chuckle, but they may also cause us to mourn.

I'm guessing you've seen this in action. As I was writing this, I observed a battle on a social media platform that turned ugly. The debate was heated, the personal attacks were flying, the discourse was in the alley. The topic? Dan Marino's rank on the list of all-time National Football League quarterbacks! Just to clarify, a debate about an athlete who played during the 1980s was drawing visceral, personal attacks.

The reason I bring this up is that it's important to get a read on where we are—to understand the times and know the landscape so we can set a course for moving forward. And the bottom line is this: we are not listening well. In fact, we are doing quite the opposite. We're talking (shouting!) over and around one another. And it's really difficult to listen when you're shouting. Please read that sentence again: *It's really difficult to listen when you're shouting.*

So how did we get here? What's causing this? To get to a solution, to get to “a still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31), it's important to understand the root causes of it all. Here's how I see it:

WHAT WE'RE CONSUMING

What would your response be if I told you that for a few hours every day, I invite someone into my life to talk over me, yell at me, tell me who to hate, what to fear, and give me generally bad news about the world? What would you say to me? Perhaps it would be something like this:

“You might want to think about that; it’s not a good idea to let all that negativity in your life.”

I agree. But isn’t that what we do every day by allowing cable news pundits and social media celebrities to be such a part of our lives? No wonder so many of us are reporting heightened levels of anxiety!

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus shares this powerful truth:

**The good person out of the good treasure
of his heart produces good, and the evil
person out of his evil treasure produces
evil, for out of the abundance of the
heart his mouth speaks.** (LUKE 6:45)

Beautifully and powerfully, Jesus says that what resides within us flows outward in our words, gestures, and actions. It makes sense, then, that because our sinful hearts lead us to consume a steady diet of argumentative discourse, negativity, misinformation, and verbal attacks on others, such things regularly and normatively come out of us.

And how much are we consuming? Recent research from a variety of sources says that the average American spends seven hours and three minutes looking at a screen every day. Some quick math on that reveals that we spend almost half of our waking hours looking at screens.¹ Ouch! And lest we say, “Well, some of that screen time is part of my job,” statistics from DataReportal reveal that the majority of our screen time is spent on our smartphones. The study says we use our phones to access social media primarily.² Again, ouch!

Consider not only the quantity of what is being consumed but the quality. From political talk shows with one-sided spokespersons to raving podcasters to sports shows with guests debating hot topics to viral videos, a common theme binds them: winning the argument, embarrassing the opposition, and “owning” the other.

Here’s my point: *The approach taken to get the most likes or shares rarely, if ever, works to build and strengthen relationships.* What works on the internet to get ratings and revenue might not be the best strategy to use at the next gathering with your extended family! A proven and winsome approach is marked by a posture and attitude of openness, curiosity, and asking good, thoughtful, sincere questions. Are you seeing any of that on cable news or social media?

HOW WE’RE CONSUMING IT

One of my favorite parts of my vocation as a parish pastor is visiting homebound folks in our church family. These are people who, for varying reasons, don’t leave home very often, so I regularly get to bring God’s Word to them and administer to them the Lord’s Supper. These are some of my favorite days because the pace of these visits is slow and the conversations are rewarding. I go with the hope of being a blessing to them and depart as the blessed one.

During these visits, there’s no need to rush. Conversations take their own pace. I learned from experience that when offered coffee, I should accept it. There is something about

clutching a warm beverage that signals to the other person, “Let’s slow down a bit.” I love these moments; my life needs more of them. Maybe yours does as well.

Time spent visiting a homebound church member is the opposite of time spent on social media. While one is about patience and organic storytelling, the other is about speed and optimized communication. How quickly can you say it? How succinct can you be? Can you stay within the character limit?

In my previous book, *Connected to Christ: Overcoming Isolation through Community*, I shared an observation that’s worth sharing again:

Major health insurance provider Cigna recently completed a survey of more than twenty thousand adults in the United States, and their findings were alarming. Part of the data broke down feelings of isolation and loneliness across different generations and age groups. Before I share the results, think for a moment—which demographic group would you expect to be the loneliest? I would have expected that older generations would report these feelings the most. After all, they often live alone, and we might not think of them as being in the socially prime season of life. However, the Cigna study reported the oldest generation experienced the greatest sense of connection and well-being.

Each subsequent generation felt increasingly lonely and isolated. Gen Z (those born from the mid-to-late 1990s to the early 2010s) reported the most loneliness and isolation.

So think about this: those who are most digitally connected feel the most alone.³

My observation, and perhaps you'll agree, is that people who are part of the older generations are good at interpersonal conversation and embracing the moment.

The congregation I serve hosts a catered luncheon for our senior members twice a year. We have a summer barbecue and a Christmas luncheon, and both are packed. Folks start to arrive around 11:30 a.m. By noon, our ample church lobby is packed, and the conversation and laughter are already flowing. These are some of my favorite events. Sometimes, I just stand back and watch them all visit. It comes so naturally to them. Even though the food we provide is really, really good, the people are in no rush to eat. Often, we wait thirty to forty-five minutes to serve the meal because we don't want to interrupt the conversation and community building!

These luncheons, however, stand in stark contrast to what we're observing in the rest of the world around us. When we combine the declining nature of our discourse as humans with the means by which this discourse is delivered, it's no wonder we struggle to listen!

So let me ask again the question that kicked off this part of the book: *Hey, culture. How's it going?* I'm guessing you'll agree that we can do better. While the internet and the age of social media have brought unique challenges, they are part of the bigger, age-old problem of our fallen human nature that the Bible speaks to frequently. Good news alert! The Bible points to a better way. In the following chapters, we'll explore this. But first, here are some questions for you to reflect on.

QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION AND REFLECTION

- 🗣️ How would you describe the current level of discourse among people in our culture?
- 🗣️ Where is our culture becoming increasingly polarized?
- 🗣️ Where do you see tribalism happening around you?
- 🗣️ Do you see tribalism in both macrocultures and microcultures? How?
- 🗣️ Think about the following statement: “The approach taken to get the most likes or shares rarely, if ever, works to build and strengthen relationships.” Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- 🗣️ How does faith in Jesus Christ invite us into something better?
- 🗣️ How does being a Christian invite us to think of others differently?
- 🗣️ Read 1 Peter 3:8. How does this verse inform your view of the world today?