

Circumcision of the Ears

By Stan Key

One of my earliest childhood memories is of my mother cleaning my ears. I can't quite remember whether she used a washcloth or a Q-tip, but somehow she believed that if my ears were clean, I would hear better. Not only was the experience humiliating; it hurt! But my mother knew something I didn't yet understand: little boys don't hear well. Of course, I'm not talking about the physical ability to pass a hearing test. I'm talking about the fact that children often don't pay attention to what their parents tell them. Oh, they may hear the words, and even be able to mechanically repeat what was said. But their actions prove that they haven't understood what was communicated.

"Young man, I told you to clean your room. Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Yes, mother. I heard you."

"No, you didn't. Do you have potatoes in your ears? Now, go clean your room."

I never understood the "potatoes" part, but I was slowly learning something that was of revolutionary importance.

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Our Father in heaven has the same concerns as my mother.

There is a difference between hearing and listening. Just because I could recite what my mother had said didn't mean that I had understood her. I was beginning to learn that listening involves more than hearing sounds. It means paying close attention, connecting with the speaker, and giving myself fully so that I could grasp the meaning of what was being said. I was surprised to realize that often "to listen" means to obey.

Our Father in heaven has the same concerns as my mother. He too wants to clean out our ears so we can better

understand what he is saying. He knows that we often think that, because we have heard something and can repeat the words, we have learned it. This only makes our deafness worse! This explains why the Bible is full of exhortations urging us to get the potatoes out of our ears so that we can truly listen to what God is saying:

- "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*" (Dt 6:4-5).
- "*Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not*" (Jer 5:21).

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Listening Prayer

By John Eldredge



In his book on prayer, *Moving Mountains* (Thomas Nelson, 2016), John Eldredge devotes a chapter to “Listening Prayer.” Though the abuses and extremes of those who claim to have “heard from God” are well known, Eldredge encourages us to discover the reality of God speaking to us directly. Abridged and slightly edited, this article is taken from Chapter 12 (137–51).

I could tell our prayers were not working; I’m not exactly sure why, I just had a strong sense nothing was going to happen. We were praying for a dear friend who seemed to keep getting sick, over and over again. He would get well, then fall back into some illness. It was a cycle that was undermining his faith and ours. So, we gathered a group of folks to lay hands on our friend and pray for physical healing. Only, it wasn’t working, and I could tell it wouldn’t even if we kept at it.

I paused, and quietly in my heart I asked Jesus, *What is going on here, Lord? What are we doing wrong? How do we change the way we are praying?*



Ask Jesus what you should pray.

Jesus replied, *Ask him how he feels about his body.*

So, I interrupted the prayer—an awkward but necessary thing to do—and told our friend, “I think Jesus is asking you a question: How do you feel about your body?” His cynical reply was immediate: “Easy—I hate my body.” And there was our answer; there was the break in the wiring. You can’t bring blessing into a body while the owner of that body is cursing it! He first needed to break those agreements with self-hatred, specifically hatred of his body, and all the judgments he was bringing against himself. Having done that, we were able to resume prayer and soon he was feeling well again.

The single most significant decision that has changed my prayer life more than any other, the one step that has brought about greater results than all others combined is this (drum roll, please...): Asking Jesus what I should pray.

So simple, and so revolutionizing! Utterly obvious once we consider it, but something we so rarely practice. But

if prayer is in fact a partnership, then I want to be in alignment with God! For here is his promise to us: “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him” (1 Jn 5:14-15).

Breathtaking. More trumpets! This one promise alone is so wonderful, so hopeful; it ought to make our hearts sing, courage and faith swelling within us like a rising volcano. “But how do I know what the will of God is?” Now that is the sixty-thousand-dollar question. Let me assure you that you can; God does not torment us by hiding his will from us, though at times it does take a little effort to discern it.

If someone asks me, “Pray that my mother and my father reconcile,” I don’t simply start praying that. For one thing, I do not know with any sort of certainty that reconciliation is what God is doing in this moment. It may well be the will of God that her parents reconcile, but it may also be that *first* he wants to address something in their

character. God doesn’t just put Band-Aids on things; it would be far more like him to first deal with the sin that was poisoning the marriage, and then bring about reconciliation.

Be careful you do not let your sympathies get in the way! Now yes, *yes—of course we pray moved by love and concern.* Of course we do. But like the first disciples, our posture needs to be, “Lord—teach us to pray.” Not just in a book or sermon, but right here, now, in the moment; teach me how to pray *about this.*

I realize that many dear followers of Christ have been taught that God only speaks to his sons and daughters through the Bible. The irony of that theology is this: *that’s not what the Bible teaches!* The Scriptures are filled with stories of God speaking to his people—intimately, personally. Adam and Eve spoke with God. As did Noah, Abraham,

Moses, Elijah, David, Jeremiah, Ananias, and the apostle Paul. On and on the examples go. Over and over again, the Scriptures provide doctrine and example that we are meant to hear God’s voice. Isaiah says it this way: “He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught” (Isa 50:4).

To be clear, I am not listening for an audible voice. I am listening for his gentle voice *within*, for that is where Jesus dwells—within our very hearts (Eph 3:17). And as I do, I am also keeping my heart open to whatever answer he has for me. This is crucial. Unless I am truly open to hearing yes or no, then the whole thing is play-acting. Surrender, true open-handedness on the question before me is crucial to hearing from God.

Jesus—what should I pray in this? will prove revolutionizing to your prayer life. The intimacy you will experience with God will nourish your soul; it is so satisfying you will crave more and more. But your prayers will also be so much more effective. 🙏

John Wesley's "Close Conversations"

By Michael Henderson



Having served as a college/seminary professor and teaching pastor for 40 years, Michael Henderson knows a lot about listening. More importantly, he knows how vital listening is to evangelism and making disciples. Henderson encourages us to follow John Wesley's example, who followed Jesus' example, of making disciples by creating moments for intimate conversations.[†]

John Wesley was an eighteenth-century preacher whose ministry revolutionized England—spiritually, morally, politically, and economically. The driving force of this national transformation was not Wesley's talent or personality, it was the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit. Mr. Wesley simply developed the tools to harness that power. His secret was to guide new Christian believers through the steps of personal spiritual growth, one structured conversation at a time. He developed a network of small groups by which the poor, the illiterate, and the uneducated could develop Christian character and be equipped with the tools to change society through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley had a great advantage: he built on a strong biblical theology. He built a system to accomplish the goal he believed was the ultimate purpose of God: to produce Christlikeness, having the mind of Christ and doing the work of God in the world. He called it "spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land." He started with the right goal, then experimented until he found the right methods to enable people to get to the goal.

Wesley had spiritual vision: he looked at the same cultural mess everybody else looked at but saw what few others could see—a great opportunity for the kingdom of God. Those who responded to his public preaching, Wesley gathered into small groups called class meetings. A leader from the local community was appointed to give oversight to each group, and Wesley secured their commitment to a rigid set of rules—not rules for conduct or theology or church membership, but guidelines for redemptive conversations. Through trial and error, he had formulated an instructional method, which if followed consistently would transform raw converts into mature Christians. He was so insistent on maintaining those methods, his followers were derisively called Methodists.

Every week these struggling new Christians met in groups of 6 to 12 to talk about their spiritual progress or lack of it. They talked. They engaged in guided conversations. They "confess[ed their] faults one to another" (Jas 5:16 KJV) as was the practice of the Early Church. They encouraged each other to spiritual growth in the context of intimate personal friendships. And those discussions brought about a national revival.

Here's how the discussions went every week: the leader (not a professional clergyman) first gave his answers to a prescribed set of questions. They were formulated in the quaint terminology of the 18th century but are just as relevant to spiritual growth today. The first question was: "How doth your soul prosper?" Here the leader described his personal walk with Christ that week. Second was, "What advantage have you taken of the means of grace?" In other words, what are you doing to foster your own spiritual growth—attending church services, family prayers, reading the Bible, reading good books, and so forth? Third: "What opportunities have you had for service and witness and how did you avail yourself of them?" Lastly: "What temptations have you faced and how did you overcome them?" Then each member of the group answered the same questions, one at a time.

In the context of a loving, supporting fellowship, people talked about the reality of following Jesus. They shared



their victories and defeats. They encouraged each other. They prayed for each other. They "stimulate[d] one another to love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24 NASB) as prescribed in Scripture. And as they grew, England was transformed. Hundreds of thousands of coal miners and factory workers were converted, their families were strengthened morally and spiritually, and their communities were transformed. Through the power of small groups, the poor were given the tools for economic advancement, the illiterate were educated, the sick were treated, and the whole nation lifted morally and socially.

There was no teaching, no preaching, no training given in the class meetings. People just talked about their personal lives, and God's Holy Spirit performed the miracle of personal transformation. As people were changed, one conversation at a time, the society was changed—from the bottom up.

John Wesley recognized powerful conversations as the indispensable key to spiritual growth. He called the

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Willful Deafness

By Leroy E. Lindsey, Jr.



Leroy Lindsey, Ph.D., is a speaker with The Francis Asbury Society and serves internationally as a missionary with One Mission Society in theological education and discipleship. He lives with his wife Kay in Florida and enjoys walking, reading, and cutting intricate paper snowflakes.

Whatever did Stephen mean when he accused the Jewish leaders of being stiff-necked and uncircumcised in hearts and ears (Acts 7:51)? What are uncircumcised ears? As readers of the New Testament, we are familiar with several passages that speak of the heart being cleansed, using the vocabulary of circumcision. But ears? What was Stephen talking about?

His accusation of the Jewish leaders for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah comes at the high point in the delivery of his “sermon.” They were stubborn to the point of having not only uncircumcised hearts but also ears. Perhaps Stephen was thinking of what Jeremiah had said to Jewish leaders centuries earlier: “To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.” (Jer 6:10).

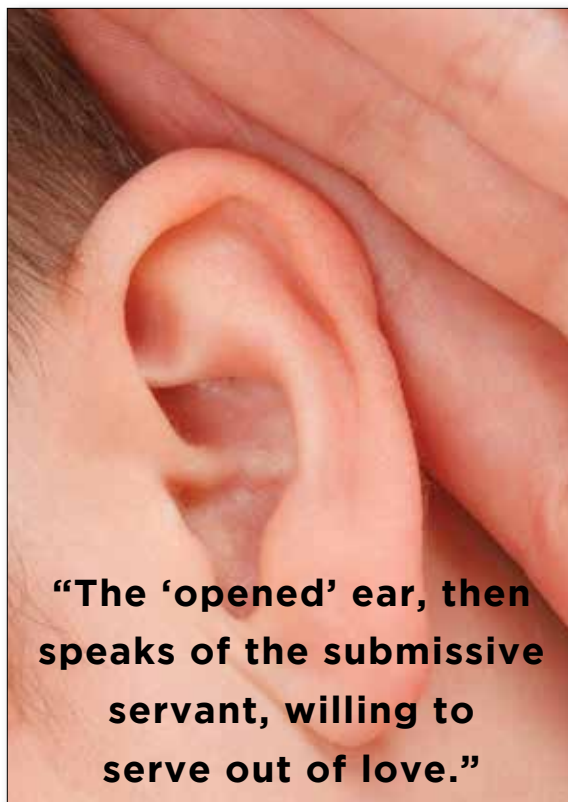
Or, perhaps, Stephen made a connection between other passages in Scripture that speak of having an ear “opened” or “pierced.” For example, in Exodus Moses gave direction to the children of Israel concerning what to do when an indentured servant chose to remain a servant to his master, even though his designated time of service had ended, or the Year of Jubilee had arrived. The master was to take the servant to a doorpost and pierce his ear through with an awl. The pierced ear was a sign of submissive, loving service, denoting obedience and surrender (see Ex 21:5-6).

The prophet Isaiah described rebellious Israel: “You have never heard, you have never known, from of old your ear has not been opened [literally, pierced, or bored]” (Isa 48:8). Then, in contrast, when he speaks of the Servant of the Lord, Isaiah says, “The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious” (Isa 50:5). The “opened” ear, then speaks of the submissive servant, willing to serve out of love. The unopened (uncircumcised) ear indicates a rebel spirit, willful disobedience, related to a stiff neck and an uncircumcised heart.

So, when Stephen accused the Jewish leaders of having uncircumcised ears, he was not just talking about their inability to hear. He was saying that they were willfully deaf. Like their sinful ancestors, they had the habitual attitude of refusing to listen to what God said. Their ears had not been pierced, opened. They had never

surrendered their wills so that they were servants of God. As the Jewish leaders listened to Stephen’s message, they would have clearly understood what he was saying. Because circumcision was not only a sign of the covenant but also a symbol of cleansing and being submissive to the will of God, Stephen was saying that these leaders of Israel were stubborn and unclean, refusing to listen to what God was telling them. This made them uncircumcised, outsiders to the covenant of Abraham.

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets had used the picture of the uncircumcised heart and the stiff neck as symbols of rebellion. So, Stephen was placing the uncircumcised ear alongside the heart as a sign of stubborn, willful rebellion. The apostle Paul declares in Romans 2:29 that true circumcision is not that of the flesh but of the heart, performed by the Holy Spirit. And in Colossians 2:11, he speaks of a circumcision “made without hands”; one that puts off “the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.”



If an uncircumcised heart is one that is unable and unwilling to love God with whole-hearted devotion, could we not say, with Stephen, that an uncircumcised ear is also a symbol of a stubborn, unwilling spirit, a willful deafness to God’s will for us? God wants us to love him with all our hearts. But to love in this way demands we give him permission to do surgery (circumcision) on our hearts. What about our ears? For them to hear as God intends requires a spiritual surgical procedure as well. What about you, dear reader? Are your ears “pierced”? Or are you a person Stephen would have to say still has “uncircumcised” ears? 🙏

John Wesley’s “Close Conversations” continued from page 3
personal interviews he conducted with those early Methodists “close conversation.” What a beautiful term for intimate, productive discussion! On one occasion he wrote, “I have found by experience that one of those [people] has learned more from one hour’s close discourse than ten years’ public preaching!”

A refreshing revival is beginning to take place in many places throughout the Christian world: people are discovering the power of close conversations. Stagnant congregations and dying denominations are realizing that traditional public worship services are insufficient to bring people to maturity in Christ. Public preaching and congregational programs are not effective vehicles to bring about personal renewal on the scale of the Wesleyan revolution. The new method that is transforming churches and communities is the technique John Wesley applied in the 18th century: intimate discussions. Wesley himself did not claim to be inventing something new but was merely rediscovering the standard practices of the first-century Church. 🙏

Love Listens

By M. Scott Peck (1936–2005)



Not classified as a Christian book, *The Road Less Traveled* (Simon and Schuster, 1978) has nevertheless been appreciated by many in the Christian community. As a psychiatrist, Peck recognized that listening is perhaps the primary characteristic of love. In this article, he focuses on the importance of parents listening to their children. Abridged and slightly edited, this article is taken from Chapter Two, "Love" (120–31).

Since love requires the extension of ourselves, it is always either work or courage. If an act is not one of work or courage, then it is not an act of love. There are no exceptions.

The principal form that the work of love takes is attention. When we love another, we give him or her our attention; we attend to that person's growth. The act of attending requires that we make the effort to set aside our existing preoccupations and actively shift our consciousness. Attention is an act of will, of work against the inertia of our own minds.

By far the most common and important way in which we can exercise our attention is by listening. To illustrate the challenge involved in listening, let us consider what is involved in listening to a six-year-old first-grader. Given the chance, a first grader will talk almost incessantly. How can parents deal with this never-ending chatter? Perhaps the easiest way is to forbid it. There are families in which the dictum "Children should be seen and not heard" applies twenty-four hours a day. A second way is to permit the chatter but simply not listen to it, so that your child is not interacting with you but is literally talking to thin air or to him—or herself, creating background noise that may or may not be annoying. A third way is to pretend to listen, proceeding along as best you can with what you are doing while appearing to give the child your attention and occasionally saying "that's nice" at more or less appropriate times. A fourth way is selective listening, which is a particularly alert form of pretend listening, wherein parents may prick up their ears if the child seems to be saying something of significance. The fifth and final way, of course, is to truly listen to the child, giving him or her your full and complete attention, weighing each word and understanding each sentence.

The reader may naively suppose that I will recommend to parents that they should always follow the fifth way and always truly listen to their children. Hardly! First of all, the six-year-old's propensity to talk is so great that a parent who always truly listened would have negligible time left to accomplish anything else. Second, the effort required to truly listen is so great that the parent would be too exhausted to accomplish anything else. Finally, it would be

unbelievably boring, because the fact of the matter is that the chatter of a six-year-old is generally boring.

What is required, therefore, is a balance of all five ways. One of the many extremely complex tasks of parenting is to be able to strike a close to ideal balance of styles of listening and not listening, responding with the appropriate style to a child's varying needs. Such a balance is frequently not struck because, even though the duration need not be long, many parents are unwilling or unable to expend the energy required for true listening. Perhaps most parents. They may think they are truly listening when all they are doing is pretend listening, or at best selective listening, but this is self-deception, designed to hide from themselves their laziness. For true listening, no matter how brief, requires tremendous effort. First of all, it requires total concentration. You cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time. Second the effort required for total concentration on the words of a six-year-old child is considerably greater than that required for listening to a great lecturer. Consequently,

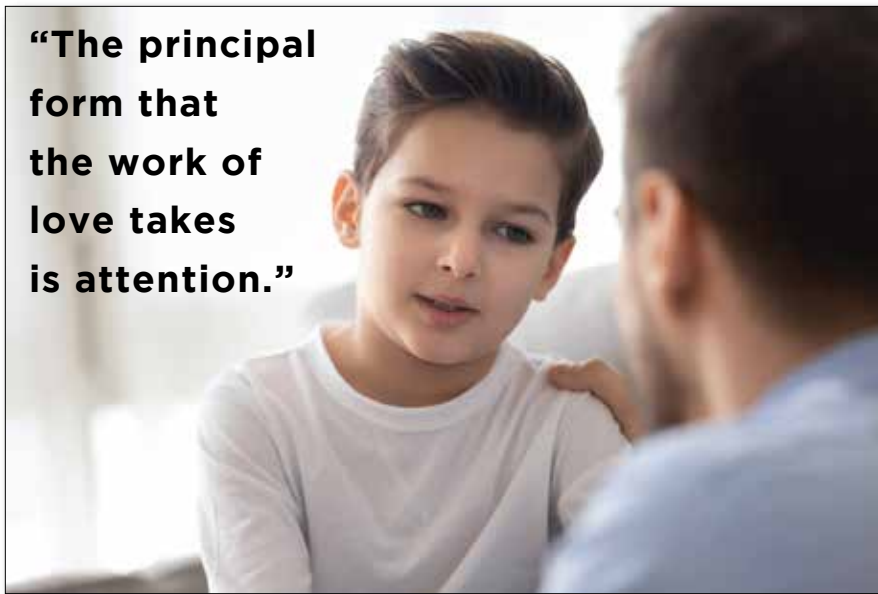
truly listening to a child of this age is a real labor of love. Without love to motivate the parent it couldn't be done.

But why bother? Why exert all this effort to focus totally on the boring prattling of a six-year-old? First, your willingness to do so is the best possible concrete evidence of the esteem you can give your child. Second, the more children feel valuable, the more they will begin to say things of value. They will rise

to your expectation of them. Third, the more you listen to your child, the more you will realize that in amongst the pauses, the stuttering, and the chatter, your child does indeed have valuable things to say. Listen to your child enough and you will come to realize that he or she is quite an extraordinary individual. And the more extraordinary you realize your child to be, the more you will be willing to listen. And the more you will learn. Fourth, the more you know about your child, the more you will be able to teach. Know little about your children, and usually you will be teaching things that either they are not ready to learn, or they already know and perhaps understand better than you. Finally, the more children know that you value them, that you consider them extraordinary people, the more willing they will be to listen to you and afford you the same esteem.

If the reader senses the cyclical character of this process, he or she is quite correct and is appreciating the truth of the reciprocity of love. Instead of a vicious downward cycle, it is a creative upward cycle of evolution and growth. Value creates value. Love begets love. Parents and child

"The principal form that the work of love takes is attention."



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The Ministry of Listening

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)



Because most evangelicals have been taught the importance of talking (witnessing, preaching, truth-telling, etc.), it may come as a surprise to learn what the Bible has to say about holding one's tongue and listening! In his classic book on Christian community, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954), Bonhoeffer underscores the truth that real ministry begins, not in talking, but in listening.

Abridged and slightly edited, this article is taken from chapter four, "Ministry" (94–99).

How, then, is true brotherly service performed in the Christian community? We are apt these days to reply too quickly that the one real service to our neighbor is to minister to him the Word of God. It is true that there is no service that compares with this one, and even more, that every other service is performed for the sake of the service of the Word of God. Yet a Christian community

talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end, there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

Brotherly pastoral care is essentially distinguished from preaching by the fact that, added to the task of speaking the Word, there is the obligation of listening. There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person. This is no fulfillment of our obligation, and it is certain that here too our attitude toward our brother only reflects our relationship to God. It is little wonder that we are no longer capable of the greatest service of listening that God has committed to us, that of hearing our brother's confession, if we refuse to give ear to our brother on lesser subjects. Secular education today is aware that often a person can be helped merely by having someone who will listen to him seriously, and upon this insight it has constructed its own soul therapy, which has attracted great numbers of people, including Christians. But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by him who is himself the great listener and whose work they should

"The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them."



does not consist solely of preachers of the Word. We can go monstrously wrong here if we overlook a number of other things.

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear. So, it is his work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are

share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God. 🙏

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together spin forward faster and faster in the *pas de deux* of love.

While listening is by far the most important form of attention, other forms are also necessary in most loving relationships, particularly with children. The variety of such possible forms is great. One is game-playing. Reading to young children is attention, as is helping older ones with their homework. Family activities are important: movies, picnics, trips, fairs, carnivals. What all these forms of attention have in common—and they have it in common with listening as well—is that they involve time spent with the child. Yes, these are tasks that are often boring, frequently inconvenient, and always energy-draining; they mean work. If we were lazier, we would not do them at all. If we were less lazy, we would do them more often or better. Since love is work, the essence of non-love is laziness. 🙏

"The first duty of love is to listen." —Paul Tillich

The Sanctified Art of Asking Great Questions

By Tim Roehl



As president of the Fit & Flourish Network, Tim Roehl has helped to train leaders in over 80 nations and 75 organizations. In his book *Lead by Listening* (Fit & Flourish, 2020) he promotes the somewhat surprising truth that *listening* is the most important yet most neglected skill in leadership—and in life! In the fifth chapter, he explains that often the key to meaningful

conversations is learning to ask the right questions. This article is abridged and slightly edited (61-74).

“Listening” and “asking” are two sides of the same coin. They are dependent on each other. Both are equally valuable—if the questions lead to more listening, discovery, and progress. If. That’s a big “if.” John Whitmore, in his classic book *Coaching for Performance*, makes this point, “It would be easy if any old question would do—BUT IT WON’T.”

So, how do we learn to ask great questions? Great question! Let’s investigate.

First, learn from Jesus, the Greatest Question Asker. Jesus asked questions that got right to the heart of a person’s life. We often focus on the teaching ministry of Jesus, but we have much to learn from the question-asking ministry of Jesus! Jesus asked over 225 questions. He often answered a question with a question. Consider some of these incredible questions Jesus asked:

- Where is your faith? (Lk 8:45).
- Why do you doubt? (Mt 14:31).
- Why do you call me, “Lord, Lord” and do not do what I tell you? (Lk 6:46).
- What good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul? (Mk 8:36).
- Why are you afraid? (Mt 8:26).
- Do you want to get well? (Jn 5:6).
- Could you not watch with me for one hour? (Mt 26:40).
- What do you want me to do for you? (Mt 20:32).
- Why were you looking for me? (Lk 2:49).

How **Not** to Ask Questions

Interrogation. This is the unfortunate result of a judgmental tone or rapid-fire questions in an uncomfortable environment. It feels more like a police interrogation—you know—the table, the mirror, the bright light, the bad coffee. Avoid interrogation by providing a comfortable environment, a gentle tone, and a caring posture.

Manipulation. Questions can be a great way to guide a conversation, but if you are not careful, they can be a way to manipulate. You are manipulating if you are using questions to force your agenda on the person or make him or her agree to something he or she is not really willing to do. There is a fine line between guiding the conversation and leading the witness.

Setup questions. Those are questions you ask because you already have the answer.

Random questions. These are questions without purpose or sequence. They lead to meaningless conversation and waste time. They are confusing.

Suggestions. This is advice with a question mark. “Wouldn’t it be better to...?” “Have you considered...?” “Don’t you think you should...?” These aren’t questions. They are directives disguised as inquisitive statements.

Humiliation. Ever had someone berate you with a question? It wasn’t intended to elicit an answer; it was intended to embarrass. Questions have great power to help, but also to hurt.

HOW TO ASK LIFE-GIVING QUESTIONS

Let’s look at seven qualities of great questions. Listening and asking start with a heart attitude and mind-set that honors others and pays attention. Great questions come from a “this is about you... I really want to know...” attitude. Remember, your body language and tone of voice speak much more loudly than your actual words.

1. *Great questions are led by the Spirit.* As you are asking and listening, you may have the Holy Spirit whisper questions or topics to you. Follow his lead. He knows us all inside and out—and always knows what is most important!
2. *Great questions are concise, clear, and understandable.* When questions are poorly worded or rambling, the result is a muddled mess. As a friend of mine used to say, “If there’s a mist in the pulpit, there will be a fog in the pew!”
3. *Great questions are open-ended, not closed.* Closed questions can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Open-ended questions are an invitation to say more. Open questions often lead to more open questions and opportunities. But you may be asking, “Can’t we ever ask a closed question?” Good question! The answer is a qualified yes. Closed questions can be used to ask for a commitment: “Will you do this?” They can also help

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The Forgotten Ministry: Pastoral Visitation

By Thomas C. Oden (1931–2016)



It seems that few pastors today take seriously the call to visit their people where they live, work, and play. Because the challenges involved in pastoral visitation are so obvious, many church leaders don't even try. And yet, in almost no other setting is the ministry of listening more fruitful. Thomas Oden believed pastoral visitation is a biblical mandate that dare not be neglected. This article, abridged and slightly edited, is taken from Chapters 12 and 13 of his classic book *Pastoral Theology* (Harper & Row, 1983: 169–75, 202–03).

A unique opportunity is given the pastor that is not offered the psychological counselor or psychotherapist. For the pastoral office carries with it the extraordinary privilege of calling upon persons in the parish at almost any time. This opens unparalleled opportunities for social service, intimate dialogue, and Christian witness.

To no other profession are such doors open. No matter how ill the patient, the physician waits until the patient



comes to the office to request medical treatment. No matter how urgently a legal client needs to write a will or know his rights, the attorney waits in his office until the client makes an appointment. It would be bad professional ethics for the dentist to knock on the door and ask if someone had a toothache. But for the minister—and among professionals the minister only—the doors of parishioners are, for the most part, open.

Visitation requires much grace, patience, and commitment. The faithful pastor will be mostly unnoticed as he quietly follows the poor to their barrios, the sick to their bedsides, the melancholic to their isolation, the alcoholic to their dregs, the grieving to their hope, and the dying to their rest. It is only by this outgoing watchfulness that one can “make full proof” of one’s ministry (2 Tm 4:5).

Even though in principle the duty of the pastor to “visit from house to house” (Acts 5:42) is widely recognized as intrinsic to the pastoral office, nonetheless it is often

neglected and sometimes awkwardly discharged. It is plagued with several recurring difficulties:

- Complicated schedules.
- The demands of a large church.
- Parishioners are spread over a large geographic area.
- Work, school, sports, etc. that keeps people busy and away from home.
- This just feels threatening and uncomfortable to many, including pastors.

A review of the biblical understanding of pastoral visitation is needed to recover the underlying meaning of this commission.

As God himself came to visit and redeem his people (Lk 1:68), so we go on behalf of God’s Son to visit and share that redemption in our own arena of service. As God himself becomes personally and bodily present in the Incarnation, so are we called to be personally present to those in our charge, especially those in urgent need.

As God the Shepherd goes out to the lost sheep and leaves the ninety and nine, so at times we must leave the secured flock and pursue the lost one who is at risk (Mt 18:12). Pastoral visitation of persons is one way of reflecting the glory of God’s own visitation of humanity in Christ, seeking the lost, redeeming sin, mending pain.

We learn most of what we need to know about pastoral visitation simply by looking carefully at the interpersonal ministry of Jesus:

- Much of his ministry was face-to-face interactions with individuals.
- His healing ministry was generally accompanied by significant life-changing conversations.
- Jesus often visited people in the ordinary places they lived and worked (the seashore, a well, the marketplace, the tax office, etc.).
- He often visited people in their homes (Mary and Martha, Simon the Leper, Levi, etc.).

Did the apostles continue this one-on-one interpersonal ministry of Jesus? Did they visit “from house to house”? Paul suggests as much in his recollection of his own ministry at Ephesus: “I did not shrink from teaching you in public and from house to house” (Acts 20:20; see also Acts 5:42).

Auricular confession provided medieval Catholicism with a regular sacramental means of engaging in one-to-one interaction between pastor and penitent. Luther’s attack on the abuses of a routinized doctrine of penance foreclosed the practice among Protestants. But it took only a short time for Protestant ministry to discover the form and style of its substitute. By returning to the apostolic practice of pastoral visitation from house to house, Protestantism devised an effective replacement for auricular confession that preserved the best aspects of

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Listening to Your Spouse

By Walter Wangerin, Jr.



Best known for his religious novels and children's books, Walter Wangerin has also written about marriage. In his book *As for Me and My House* (Thomas Nelson, 1990), he devotes a chapter to the subject of "Talking and Listening." If ever there was a need for "circumcised ears," it is in marriage! This article is abridged and slightly edited (166–70).

At the beginning of his reign, King Solomon prayed for one superior gift from God. Not wealth, not long life, but something far more valuable—he asked for "an understanding heart," which may be translated, *a hearing heart*. He asked, we say, for wisdom. But the genius of wisdom, dear husbands and wives, is the ability to open a room in one's heart for the talk—and so for the presence—of another. Wisdom is none other than the ability to listen.

And listening is an active labor, a learned skill, not a passive silence as though two were taking turns at the same game. False listening is waiting *for* the other to finish; good listening is waiting *on* the other while he or she speaks, as good servants, with intense attention, wait on their employers.

A "learned skill"? No, in marriage it must again and again be a *relearned* skill, since we grow used to one another. We become each other's habit. The newness of the relationship resolves into sameness: same person, same voice, same tone of voice, the same old topics. Her talking becomes a background hum, like Musak; he repeats the same old tune (we think), the same refrain of irritations. And so we assume we know what they're going to say before they say it—and do not listen. You have my ear, my dear (but not my mind, my clean attention, or room in my heart; these, for the moment, are filled with my self).

Listening requires the sacrifice of self-denial. Always talking, never listening, is a blatant self-assertion. Mostly talking and only feigning to listen ("You had your turn, it's my turn now") is hypocritical, a hidden self-assertion. But true listening lays oneself aside a while: for this moment not my opinions but yours have celebrity; not my interests but yours are ours; not my words but yours have life.

1. Show the listening.

Your body speaks a silent language. By how you act, when the talker is talking, you invite him or her into your heart or you shut yourself against the other. Look at her. Acknowledge him. Whether or not the topic is trivial, the talker is not. Light glances and smiles are a significant reward. Eyes to her eyes shares the matter. Nodding, leaning forward—these are tiny gestures but mighty encouragement and true participation in the talk. If you turn your back, clean your glasses, rub your eyes, tap your foot, or give any indication of impatience, what does that say? It signals the judgment that he and his words are less important than something else. *Get to the point!* you silently say. But what if there is no point? There doesn't

have to be a point. Language needn't always communicate some message. One of its most blessed virtues is that it turns confusion into order. It is therapeutic, then, sometimes just to talk.

2. Empty your heart in order to listen.

You say: "We've been married so long; I know my husband (my wife) like a book." No, I say. You never completely know the other. And the assumption that you do only hinders your true listening and so keeps you from knowing him or her.

Alice thought she knew her husband. She was so sure of him that every time he started a sentence, she finished it for him; every time he paused, she filled in the blank. But they were her words, not his. She was listening to her image of him, not to him. Alice had never shut off Alice (emptied herself). And Paul is not much different. Even though he displays an honest love for Esther, Esther is



**"Always talking, never listening,
is a blatant self-assertion."**

anguished, and he does not know it. Their conversation is all full of his happy self. He *assumes* her happiness, too. He assumes who she is; he doesn't listen. When she tries to speak things that are horrible to her (her hatred of the children, for example), he comforts her with platitudes because he has not heard the horror. Empty yourself, even—especially—if you fear to hear what lurks in your marriage.

Finally, there will certainly come times when your spouse will want and need to forgive you. But you cannot receive forgiveness if first you have not heard and admitted your sin. He or she must speak the harder thing first. Even then, empty yourself. This is humility. If you remain full of yourself, then you'll meet your spouse's necessary talk with defensiveness, not listening but arguing, disputing, denying; and if you cannot hear the sin, you will never hear the forgiveness that would bind you together again.

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personal pastoral dialogue yet tended to protect it from familiar medieval abuses.

Medieval penance rested upon a sound psychological principle: the need of the human spirit to unburden itself in the presence of a trusted companion who could mediate the forgiveness of God. Protestantism sustained that value while at the same time resisting the potential distortions of sacramental penance.

Just as a priest hearing confession needs patience, wisdom, and a good ear, so the Protestant pastor's task in visitation is far less to become a good talker than it is to become a gifted listener. Earlier pastoral writers long before Carl Rogers knew that often the pastor's greatest possible service was to listen accurately without predisposing judgments.

The pastor should not complain when parishioners pour out to him or her their troubles, heartbreaks, and problems. Put simply, that is the pastor's task. It comes with the territory. Though at times emotionally draining, it remains the work of clergy. This is what the older tradition called personal ministry or the ministry of friendship.

This kind of ministry is not easily engineered or manipulated as if you could schedule it for a given hour each week. It is an odd and recent misconception that one might assume that at ten o'clock Tuesday one is going to have a significant pastoral conversation with a person because an appointment is on the book for that time. That is not the way personal ministry works. One must be alert to the serendipities when they develop, whether between the acts of a school play or on a jogging track or after a tense committee meeting. But they will not happen if the parishioner does not have confidence in both the office and the person of the minister. That trust is gained mostly through trustworthy encounters. That is an important part of what empathic pastors often are doing, even when they look like they are doing other things. 🙏

3. Holy listening produces the fruit of the Spirit.

What an opportunity for love is listening! And what shining benefits it sheds upon the marriage! Do you know that it is the active listener, and not the talker, who is more Christlike in the dialogue? In listening—by listening—the fruit of the Spirit manifests itself within your relationship (see Gal 5:22-23).

Unselfish love allows the other person the central spot of the dialogue and a place in your heart, which, for the while, is emptied of yourself and truly open. Just as the disciples received the risen Lord with joy, so it is your joy (and you show it!) to receive the speaker's talk, thought, and life within you. Peace is, in Hebrew, *shalom*: wholeness, health, well-being. Not only does your listening affirm the being of the speaker, but it is the oneness, the wholeness, of your marriage. But such listening requires of you what the Spirit itself gives you to do. You are able, dear listener, (God makes you able) to be *patient*, granting the speaker the time and the attention necessary. You are able to be *kind*, uncritical and un interrupting, which would spoil true talk before it's done. You are able to handle the speaker's revelations, whether little or large, personal or general, happy or horrible, with *goodness*, with *faithfulness* to your spouse, and with *gentleness*, all important qualities since these revelations are in some measure the speaker's self. If the talk is genuine, the talker is made vulnerable by it, stands disclosed, naked; but she or he is willing to do so unashamed—because you handle the fragile thing with care. All this you do by practicing a godly *self-control*. God grants it, even to the most headstrong and compulsive husbands and wives among us. You are able. 🙏

“Leaders who refuse to listen, will eventually be surrounded by people who have nothing to say.”

—Andy Stanley

Does My Talking Improve the Silence?

By Robert K. Greenleaf (1904–1990)

Few people have been more influential in reshaping management and leadership policy than Robert K. Greenleaf. In his classic book *Servant Leadership*, he discusses the important place listening has in leadership and laments how rarely it is practiced (30–31).†

Why is there so little listening? Part of it, I believe, with those who lead, is that the usual leader in the face of a difficulty tends to react by trying to find someone else on whom to pin the problem, rather than by automatically responding: “I have a problem. What is it? What can I do about my problem?” The sensible person who takes the latter course will probably react by listening, and somebody in the situation is likely to say what the problem is and what should be done about it. Or enough will be heard that there will be an intuitive insight that resolves it.

I have a bias about this which suggests that only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem

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by listening *first*. When one is a leader, this disposition causes one to be *seen* as servant first. This suggests that a non-servant who wants to be a servant might become a *natural* servant through a long arduous discipline of learning to listen, a discipline sufficiently sustained that the automatic response to any problem is to listen first. I have seen enough remarkable transformations in people who have been trained to listen to have some confidence in this approach. It is because true listening builds strength in other people.

The best test of whether we are communicating at this depth is to ask ourselves first: Are we really listening? Are we listening to the one with whom we want to communicate? Is our basic attitude, as we approach the confrontation, one of wanting to understand? Remember that great line from the prayer of Saint Francis, “Lord, grant that I may not seek so much to be understood as to understand.”

One must not be afraid of a little silence. Some find silence awkward or oppressive, but a relaxed approach to dialogue will include the welcoming of some silence. It is often a devastating question to ask oneself—but it is sometimes important to ask it—“In saying what I have in mind will I really improve on the silence?” 🙏

Circumcision of the Ears continued from page 1

- “Take care then how you *hear*” (Lk 8:18).
- “He who has ears, let him *hear*” (Mt 11:15; 13:9, 43).
- “Let every person be quick to *hear*, slow to speak, slow to anger” (Jas 1:19).

Why can't people hear the voice of God? And why can't they hear one another? (The two questions are surely related.) Finding answers to these two questions can revive your soul, transform your marriage, reform the church, and change the world!

Because spiritual deafness is a *spiritual* and not a physical problem, it can never be cured by human efforts alone. We can lean forward, turn off background noise, carefully use a Q-tip, and wear hearing aids, but none of these techniques address the root problem. Shouting is no solution when the problem is deafness. When Jesus put his fingers in the ears of the deaf man and groaned in prayer, “Ephphatha” (“Be opened”), he was acknowledging that only a miracle of grace can open deaf ears (see Mk 7:31-37). Deafness is a malady that only God can cure!

Twice in the Bible, spiritual deafness is attributed to the fact that the hearers' ears are uncircumcised! What? *Circumcision of the body* was the sign of the covenant. It set people apart, identifying them as belonging to God (see Gen. 17). Moses and Paul spoke of *circumcision of the heart*, showing that God's redemptive purposes for us involve more than behavior modification. He intends to transform us, from the inside out (see Dt 30:6 and Rom 2:29). While we can readily understand circumcision of the body and circumcision of the heart, *circumcision of the ears* sounds strange. What can this mean? Jeremiah, in the Old Testament, and Stephen, in the New, believed that the reason their message was rejected was because peoples' ears were “uncircumcised” (see Jer 6:10 and Acts 7:51). This was the root problem that explained why their listeners could not hear what they were saying. As Stephen explained, those who “always resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51) are simply unable to hear. They are deaf to both God and man. It takes a work of grace, like that



“The thing I remember most about Dr. Kinlaw is how he listened.”

symbolized by circumcision, to open deaf ears. Like the deaf man in the Gospel story, a divine touch is needed. Without it, we will remain forever deaf, unable to hear God's voice and unable to hear one another.

This issue of *The High Calling* is devoted to the subject of hearing, cleaning out our ears so that we can both listen to God and to one another. If you are scratching your head, wondering why a theme like *that* would be treated in a holiness magazine, perhaps it reveals that you, dear friend, are deafer than you realize.

We live in a noisy world, where shouting at one another has become our primary method of communication. No one seems to listen. The deafness found today in our

families, churches, and nation is one of the greatest indicators I know of our need for the proclamation and the experience of entire sanctification! We need more than training in “listening techniques.” We need a divine touch, a deeper work of grace. John Wesley loved to preach on circumcision of the heart. I'm encouraging us to also learn how to preach on circumcision of the ears!

Dennis Kinlaw, the founder of The Francis Asbury Society, died just over four years ago. At his visitation and funeral, many

conversations focused on special memories people had with Dr. Kinlaw. One theme that was repeated over and over went something like this:

The thing I remember most about Dr. Kinlaw is how he listened. When I found a moment with him after he preached, it was as if there was no one else in the room. We locked eyes and he gave me his undivided attention. He listened with his whole being. It made me feel valued, cherished, significant; it made me feel loved. Because he listened, I am a different person!

All the articles in this issue of *The High Calling* are about listening: to God and to one another. As you read, invite the Spirit of Holiness to sanctify not just your heart, mind, and body. Give him permission to circumcise your ears! 🙏

The Sanctified Art of Asking Great Questions continued from page 7

- clarify what we are hearing: “What I'm hearing is... am I hearing you correctly?”
4. *Great questions create opportunities to “paint a picture.”* Open questions invite people to paint a picture. Previously unrecognized ideas, insights and understanding come to the surface, often leaving us amazed. There's treasure to be discovered in every person's picture!
 5. *Great questions lead to clarity and discovery.* We don't want to settle for just acquiring information. Invite thought and reflection. Here are some examples: “What did you learn through the experience?” “What conclusions are you drawing?” “Knowing what you know now, what would you change in the future?” Keep asking and listening until the light comes on.
 6. *Great questions are comprehensive and holistic.* If we are not intentional, we tend to gravitate to what's familiar, comfortable, or interesting for us. In so doing, we may completely miss what the other person needs. Learn to ask great questions that allow you and your partner to walk around an issue from a variety of perspectives.
 7. *Great questions are constructive.* We want to build up, not tear down. Even when we deal with hard or uncomfortable subjects, we can still leave others knowing that they matter.
- I've learned to ask one last question in important conversations. “What questions do you wish you would have been asked?” It might add the final touches to the painting or might give permission to reveal what a person wanted to share all along. Try it and see. 🙏



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More than a Transaction

By Charlie Fiskeaux, Special Assistant to the President for Financial Affairs

When is a charitable contribution more than a transaction; that is, when is it more than a simple exchange between two parties? We all enter into transactions of various types: buying groceries, making a mortgage payment, purchasing a movie ticket, or sending a contribution to our favorite charity. A transaction for purchase involves a two-way exchange of value for each party. But what about a charitable gift transaction?

Many may consider a contribution to be simply a transaction with value only for the recipient. However, a contribution can be much more than a simple transaction, particularly when the spiritual dimension is considered. When the donor's desire is focused on advancing the spiritual effectiveness of the ministry, the contribution becomes more than just a transaction: the donor spiritually participates in the ministry itself. When considered spiritually, it could be argued that there is significant value in the exchange for the donor!

Do you want to participate in a spiritual ministry that is worthy of your contributions? The Francis Asbury Society purposes to be such an organization by proclaiming the message of Scriptural holiness that persons can be transformed to live wholly devoted to God.

Details for various methods of giving to the ministries of the Francis Asbury Society are available on the website <http://www.francisasburysociety.com/support>.

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