

GOSPEL COMMUNITY

HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

The tools, tips, and practices to help you navigate those difficult but necessary conversations.

WHY DO WE NEED TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS?

As Christians we must be willing and prepared to have difficult conversations! We must remember that the Lord disciplines those He loves and those He calls His children (Heb 2:6). Proverbs teaches that as iron sharpens iron, so we sharpen one another (Prov 17:7). Further, we learn that the wounds from a friend can be trusted (Prov 27:6). Meaning hard conversations rooted in prayer and love are good, healthy, and biblical. They are for our flourishing and freedom, no matter how difficult or seemingly painful they can be.

A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Let's look to 1 Corinthians 13 to guide any hard conversations we are discerning we may need to have with someone in our community. Through the pen of Paul, God teaches us what love looks like in the way we speak to and interact with one another as His people:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." - 1 Cor 13: 1-7

In short, it doesn't matter how right the words or the timing are - if they're not covered in prayer and rooted in authentic, selfless love, wait - you're not ready!

PRACTICAL APPLICATION: THREE TOOLS

***The following is adapted and sometimes directly borrowed from Crucial Accountability by Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, MacMillan and Switzler.*

It's not a question of if but when we will have to have difficult conversations about boundaries, expectations, accountability, discipleship, patterns of sin, offenses and unforgiveness to name a few. Here's a few more scenarios you may encounter:

- Someone is leaving their spouse
- An individual has an issue with a church leader or decision that you agree with
- Someone is seeking your counsel about remarriage when you know they don't have biblical grounds for remarriage
- A member of your community is destructively spreading their grievances with a past offense with another member/leader/staff person, etc. and you're not sure how to approach them about it

- Someone is clearly living in a pattern of habitual sin but doesn't seem to know or care
- Another member has an issue with you and you're not sure how to seek reconciliation

Despite being hard conversations, it's only in having them that we'll help bring about clarity, confidence, and unity. When your heart is ready for a loving conversation here are some things to consider as you head into your next difficult conversation:

TOOL #1: Don't start with "why"

1. Ask, don't tell - keep asking questions at all times.
2. Be curious – "I wonder why ..." – first time be curious, next time ask (based on patterns not an isolated incident).
 - Ask questions don't make statements
3. Describe gap (See tool #2)
 - Ask questions
4. Clear and clarified commitments (with action and outcome clearly communicated)

TOOL #2: Describe the gap

A simple magic script for accountability from the authors of Crucial Accountability.

1. Stay curious
2. Describe expected vs observed
3. Describe gap
4. End with a question

EXAMPLE:

Expectation: "I thought we agreed on ..."

Reality: "I noticed that ..."

Gap: "What happened...?"

Commitment: "If this happens again we agree that ..."

TOOL #3: Master our own stories

This is very important when living in community with others. Stories are different from facts. Stories are judgements, conclusions, and attributions that we make from facts (true events). These are fabricated stories that lead to emotional unhealth and can destroy Jesus' Church.

We must master the stories we tell ourselves following a situation or interaction with someone. But first, let's look at how this cycle starts and the pathway that leads to false story-telling:

1. **Truth:** The facts based on what we see and hear – this is the true experience.
2. **False story:** From there we create a story that becomes “truth” for us. (For example, “this person is questioning my capabilities”; “this person thinks I’m incompetent”).
3. **Feeling:** The story generates a feeling: hurt and defensive; which leads to anger; and then lands on untrue conclusions. Feelings are subjective. We cannot treat our feelings like objective truth.
4. **Conclusions:** Finally, you act out on these untrue conclusions. (For example, you hold grudges; you stop listening or responding to this person or their suggestions; you draw further conclusions and make assumptions about their intentions in future interactions based on these incorrect stories you tell yourself.

Three skills are necessary to help us master our stories and help others master theirs: If we are going to deal with conflict biblically and direct others to do the same we need to be proficient with these three skills:

THREE NECESSARY SKILLS

SKILL #1 – Separate facts from stories

When you separate facts from stories you realize the same facts could be used to tell an infinite number of stories. Be diligent to separate fact from fiction (interpretation). This step takes time and work!!!

SKILL #2 – Beware of these three dangerous narratives

We tell stories that help us feel good about doing things that ruin our relationships and outcomes. We must identify and confess that we are believing one of these narratives and release it. We can’t move on until we step out of these narratives. They are a trap. Nobody wins.

1. Victim stories – it’s not my fault, I’m innocent in this, I am a victim.
2. Villain stories – it’s all your fault – these stories emphasize others’ bad qualities and negate our own contribution and responsibility to any breakdown or misunderstanding.
3. Helpless stories – there’s nothing else I can do – these stories convince us that we have no healthy options for taking action.

SKILL #3 – Tell the rest of the story

What’s next – after you’ve retraced the pathway, separated fact from fiction, and recognized the dangerous narratives it is time to tell the rest of your story:

Add valuable information:

1. Assess your role – what am I pretending not to notice about my role in the problem

2. Humanize others – seek to see others’ good qualities – assume the best by asking question: “*Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do this?*” If they’re not reasonable or if there’s a deeper issue – we seek to understand this as well – sinful people, sinful hearts!
3. Turn yourself from helpless to able – what should I do right now to move toward what I really want?

Retell your story:

Once you’ve mastered your story, update the information and the new true conclusions formally with yourself.

- “Now this leads me to believe...”
- “I’m now starting to think that....”

If you find yourself going back to old unhealthy stories, confess and repent of those (to God and a godly accountability partner) and remind yourself of what is objectively true (not feelings). In the same way we have to refresh our internet browsers with the new/ updated information on a webpage we have to develop a discipline of refreshing the narratives we have told ourselves. Forgiveness and releasing offenses to the Lord is a lifelong discipline. This takes time. It’s not a one-time effort.

LOOKING FOR FURTHER RESOURCES?

For help with having hard conversations, tools for studying the Bible, and so much more you can always head over to wchurch.ca/gcresources. And if you still can’t find what you’re looking for, reach out to community@wchurch.ca.