

“Bam! Lori Roeleveld does it again . . . and again . . . and again! She lures you in with her words and leads you straight to the One who is the ultimate answer to every hard conversation. Her books come alive and have a way of connecting our mind with our heart. *The Art of Hard Conversations* helps us to proceed with caution yet maintain our perspective. When we must engage in hard conversations, Lori shows us how to do it with love. Which, after all, is what life is really about.”

Tammy Whitehurst, motivational speaker, author, and co-owner of
Christian Communicators Conference

“Real, practical advice on the art of leaning into hard conversations. Roeleveld offers compassion, insight, and guidance to help us speak the truth in love. A book all of us need.”

Tosca Lee, *New York Times* best-selling author

“In *The Art of Hard Conversations*, Lori Roeleveld beautifully avoids preaching by telling her own story—what she’s learned, how she’s changed, and the dramatic difference it’s made in her life. That’s the kind of message that reaches me, and it’ll reach you too.”

Jerry B. Jenkins, author of the Left Behind series and
writing coach

“As someone skilled at conflict avoidance (that’s a nice way of saying I’m terrified of confrontation), I picked up *The Art of Hard Conversations* prepared to be challenged to grow a spine and scrounge up some courage. What I discovered in these pages was a conversation—at times humorous, at times poignant, always deeply personal and transparent. Lori writes like a friend who understands my fears and struggles and doesn’t want to change my personality but wants to equip me within the framework of my own God-given design. As a coach and confidant, Lori gently encourages both the bold and the bashful to approach hard conversations with finesse and grace. *The Art of Hard Conversations* is a resource I will be returning to again and again.”

Lynn H. Blackburn, best-selling and award-winning author of
Beneath the Surface and *In Too Deep*

“Once again Lori Stanley Roeleveld speaks straight to your soul. Each lesson lingers in your heart as she encourages and empowers you to trust your instincts and your heavenly Father in the delicate art of difficult conversations with those you love. This is a must-read for every parent, child, spouse, and friend.”

Bethany Jett, award-winning author of *The Cinderella Rule*

“Why should we invest ourselves in hard conversations, in encounters that seem so likely to go wrong, to cause even more pain, to be a waste of time? ‘They are hard because they matter’ is Lori’s deep conviction, and in this highly readable book, she proves this point that many of us miss, while unveiling practical strategies that equip everyone for the inevitable difficulties and drama. This is clear, strong, gently confrontational writing that lets no one off the hook and yet affirms everyone’s potential for breakthroughs inside us and between us. Lori’s message is life-giving, liberating, and bracing, fortifying us to face conflict and estrangement, as well as our own fears and insecurities. With an obvious concern for our emotional health and interpersonal integrity, Lori invites us to explore God’s Word as the guide for selecting our words, and to submit ourselves to God’s Spirit, who reshapes our character and refines our speech. I enthusiastically recommend this book for people of all ages and backgrounds, for all of us who feel at a loss in stressful verbal interactions.”

Doug Stevens, pastor of Community Covenant Church,
Lenexa, Kansas

“Lori has written an excellent manual for talking to others about challenging topics with the foundation of knowing Christ. I was encouraged to trust the Word and the Holy Spirit, who gives discernment and leads us as well as those we must talk to, to see clearly what is in our own hearts. She lifts up the truth of our Redeemer so we can grasp how much freedom there is in trusting His ways of humility and kindness, rather than our own ideas of how someone must be ‘fixed.’ I love this book and highly recommend it to anyone longing to have good, kind, and genuinely helpful conversations!”

Valerie Elliot Shepard, author of *Devotedly* and
daughter of Elisabeth Elliot

THE ART OF
HARD
CONVERSATIONS

also by **Lori Stanley Roeleveld**

*Running from a Crazy Man (and Other Adventures Traveling
with Jesus)*

*Red Pen Redemption
Jesus and the Beanstalk*

THE ART OF
HARD Biblical Tools
for the Tough Talks
That Matter
CONVERSATIONS

LORI STANLEY ROELEVELD



The Art of Hard Conversations: Biblical Tools for the Tough Talks That Matter

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Dedicated to Rev. Doug Stevens

*You were pivotal in inciting me to live radically for Jesus,
to root my soul in biblical truth, and to seek from God the
courage to write light into a dark world. Nothing to prove
and nothing to lose—all the way home, my brother.*

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FOREWORD

If there was only one word to describe my social abilities, it would be *zilch*. For me, navigating a conversation is just as hard as navigating traffic, and I have no sense of direction when it comes to doing either. Which explains how I ended up making a wrong turn and driving to Alaska, where I lived as a hermit in a remote cabin for five years.

At that point in my life I had decided that I'd much rather engage an angry grizzly in a conversation than another human being. At least then I stood a better chance of escaping unscathed. That remote Alaskan cabin is where I met Jesus, though, and where I felt my call to use my talents to write and minister in the entertainment industry, which meant returning to the Lower 48 and facing my biggest fear . . . people.

Although my life changed in Alaska, my social awkwardness remained unaffected. Whenever I faced a difficult conversation, I found myself stammering and flailing to look for the right words—the way a drowning person looks for a life vest.

And that's exactly what *The Art of Hard Conversations* has become to me. It's a life vest for the conversationally challenged, and an essential tool to consult during those times when you feel like you're struggling to stay afloat amid the sometimes choppy waters of relationships.

I had the opportunity to put some of Lori's tools to the test when I encountered a stranger crying at a highway rest area. Having committed some of Lori's advice to memory, I had the confidence to start a hard conversation, and God supplied the rest of the words I needed as we talked. I was able to overcome the awkwardness and to comfort a grieving heart with the knowledge that God cares.

Lori has packed this book with God's Word, her own life lessons, profound wisdom, and numerous tips and techniques that will keep your

head above water and your spirit flowing in the right direction. I'd recommend it to anyone who struggles when it comes to finding the right words for a difficult conversation. I'm sending copies of this book to several family members—and to a couple of grizzlies with anger issues.

Torry Martin

Actor, Author, Screenwriter

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Rob, my kids, grandkids, and parents for pulling together through the hardest year of our lives and encouraging me to keep writing through it all.

INTRODUCTION

Why Bother Having Hard Conversations? (Why Is It an Art?)

Your next conversation could impact someone's life forever. Maybe you've been delaying it, or until now, you've talked without effect. This book will guide you toward fruitful dialogue that will make a difference—possibly for eternity.

Like most things in life, conversations that present the greatest challenge also provide the biggest reward. The keys to transformation, unification, and authentic breakthroughs are usually found on the other side of hard conversations.

If you pay attention to the way God works, you won't be surprised when I suggest most soul-shaping, life-altering discussions will happen not before international audiences or from televised pulpits but in kitchens, cubicles, and foyers and on front porches. Much like shepherds locating the King of Kings in a smelly stable, seemingly inconsequential settings can provide the backdrop for exchanges that convert coffee shop booths into outposts of glory.

■ Hard conversations are hard because they matter.

You may be the only one who can make this happen for the people (or person) you had in mind when you opened this book. They don't realize it, but on some level, they're depending on you to get this right. Whether

you're a hesitant conversationalist or an enthusiastic but blundering one, the tools here will equip you for rapid and lasting improvement when connecting with others using the common vehicle of conversation. Like other ordinary things—bread, water, wine—conversation is elevated to new heights and deeper meanings at the touch of our Lord.

You're not alone. We all look for help on this topic. Hard conversations are hard because they matter. When subjects are important, we can let their magnitude either paralyze us into avoidance or push us into premature, often clumsy efforts.

Like our Father God, we seek to communicate. Often, the ideas we want to convey have eternal ramifications. But when we do try to speak on weighty topics, discuss deeply personal issues, or explain our perspective to someone who differs, it can be challenging to get out of our own way. We want our words to flow unimpeded, but too often, they crash, causing conversational traffic jams. Our intent gets lost in the clamor of verbal horns honking and emotional sirens blaring.

While hard conversations are difficult, they're also inevitable, necessary, and often, biblically imperative. Speaking tough truths and comforting people through trials are expected undertakings for Jesus followers. But too often, we either fumble or flee. And there is no scientific formula to successful hard conversations. Because of this, I believe the subject merits an entire book.



Barriers arise around tough talks because our enemy knows they're a spiritual front line.

After decades of study and practice, I've come to view hard conversations as an art—usually a language art, often a healing art, sometimes a performing art, and occasionally a martial art.

They are obviously a language art because they involve words. A healing art, because through them, we open doors for God to heal hearts, minds, souls, and relationships—often in ways we cannot imagine. They are like a performing art because there's significant commitment and practice required (sometimes for years) involving flubs and follies, to produce a work of beauty and awe. And there are others

behind the scenes (coaching, praying, and so forth) contributing to any success.

Hard conversations are like a martial art. They are key instruments of deepening relationships, resolving conflicts, encouraging spiritual growth, and spreading the gospel, and the evil one would rather we avoid them in fear instead of facing them in faith.

Barriers arise around tough talks because our enemy knows they're a spiritual front line. Countless people are damaged by situations or conditions that might have been avoided if someone had been willing to have a hard conversation early on.

I believe hard conversations are also a sacred art, a calling by Christ on our lives, a kingdom-building work He compels us and equips us to do. Speaking truth is one way we invoke Jesus in our everyday and represent Him even in common moments.

Like me, you want to follow Jesus, even into hard conversations. Your love for God and for others is prodding you to release your hold on the comfort of silence or relinquish the habit of saying too much too fast. You want your words to make a difference, but you're worried you don't have what it takes. You do.

I wrote this book with just you in mind. I've designed it for readers who want to have effective, fruitful conversations, even when that's hard. We'll discuss spiritual principles and specific strategies anyone can employ to improve challenging conversations. I'll share some of my biggest failures and you can learn from what I've done wrong, as well as what I've learned to do right.

As with any art, one may initially learn about it through reading or hearing, but at some point, we must interact with and practice the skills ourselves. I strongly urge you to employ the tools in the ARTwork exercises following each lesson. There are three to five lessons within each unit, fewer lessons when there are more skills to practice. We change best in small bites, so Answering a thought question, Reading relevant Scripture, and Trying a new conversational tool (hence ARTwork) will serve you in improving your ability to talk about hard things.

You'll find I've included many examples and stories, from both biblical passages and modern-life situations. In some, you'll identify with the

initiator of the chat. In others, you'll relate to the participant. There's something to learn from each. This isn't a book about good guys and bad guys, "goofuses and gallants." It's about complex, faulted, hopeful humans trying to connect through conversations, even when it's hard, over subjects that matter.

We'll cover the personalities and styles we bring to conversations. I'll explain some of the internal walls we must either dismantle, descend, or dismiss for more productive exchanges. I'll provide a six-question soul preparation that will better equip you to initiate talks. We'll cover the heart-work we must do to prepare and the hard work of navigating conversations with loved ones about trials, with strangers about salvation, and with friends about faith. These skills will serve us whether we initiate the talks or they are thrust upon us.

Additionally, you'll benefit from employing the assignments, Bible readings, and tips I've included at the end of each unit. These little "Heart of the Art Practice" sections afford you even more opportunity to grow in your new skills.

We follow a God who calls us into relationship. We're to demonstrate biblical living. That means obedience and action, but it also means that sometimes we must open our mouths and let words come out. We want those words to reach their mark.

Studying the Scriptures referenced in this book, practicing the strategies, and enlisting the ongoing support of other mature believers will set you on the road of working alongside Jesus in this ministry of hard conversations.

It won't happen overnight. Every sacred art takes time, practice, and the work of the Holy Spirit. We won't perfect it until we're all home, but we can certainly make an adventure of trying.

Colossians 1:28–29 says this: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." As we obey the call of this verse, we will encounter enough hard conversations to last a lifetime, so we best be prepared.

Exhale. Be hopeful in Christ. Let's begin.

PART 1

**Perspectives and
Personalities—Understanding
and Embracing the Challenge**

UNIT 1

The Place of Personality in Hard Conversations

Lesson 1

The Life You Save May Be Your Own

Moreover, he said to me, “Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart, and hear with your ears. And go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD,’ whether they hear or refuse to hear.” (Ezek. 3:10–11)

I was ten when I stood beside my dad’s recliner and told him he was in a coma. That was the first hard conversation that changed my life.

Dad was a wall of inattention in my childhood. As a volunteer fire chief with a day job, if he wasn’t working, he was fighting fires. He wasn’t home often, but when he was, it was usually after a stop by the local bar to decompress. Our lives were messy back then.

I was desperate to reach him. Like every child does, I craved a full relationship with my father. I longed for his attention, but by ten, apparently I’d realized it wasn’t going to happen soon. So, I navigated the problem in a way that worked for me and then gathered my nerve to inform him. Since I was only encouraged to speak during commercials, I’d rehearsed saying what I had to say quickly.

“Dad, from now on, I’m going to treat you like you’re in a coma. I believe the dad I need is in there somewhere and can hear me. Even if you can’t show me that you love me, I know you do. So, I’m just going to talk to you when I feel like it. You can respond whenever you’re ready. One day you’ll decide to come out of your coma. This way, when you do, we’ll have already been having these kinds of chats. Okay, well, that’s all. I love you.”

He didn’t even acknowledge I’d spoken. Not then. But one day, when I was in my late twenties, my dad did, in fact, “wake up” to the relationships in his immediate circle. For the later decades of his life we’ve been very close. Our family has had the joy of knowing him as a changed man, through the power of prayer and the grace of Jesus.

It took a lot for me, as a child, to speak those words. They had no visible effect on him, but they freed me. In a powerful way, his inability to carry on his end of the conversation no longer held me hostage. It’s a freedom I believe more of us can experience.

The awesome beauty and terrifying truth of hard conversations is that even if the outcome isn’t what we had hoped, they still have the power to set at least one of the participants free. And our job isn’t to change someone. Our job is to speak “whether they hear or refuse to hear.”



Hard conversations free us either to work toward resolution or to walk away without regret.

We should always aim for true dialogue. Plan for mutual breakthrough. Plant our faith firmly on Jesus’s ability to redeem any situation, relationship, or individual. But when the other person chooses to remain on the other side of the wall, we can still experience release. Hard conversations free us either to work toward resolution or to walk away without regret.

When I was still too young to appreciate the dynamic of it, God led me into a conversation with Dad that freed me in a way I wouldn’t understand for many years. He didn’t change, so I changed. More than that, I named the problem, created boundaries I could live within, and

informed him of my choice to write a different story than we were currently living.

Yes, I was a child, but I was a child who knew Jesus, and that made all the difference.

Hard conversations challenge everyone. We avoid them to our detriment or abuse them to our harm. Most of us resist bringing up uncomfortable topics, and all of us squirm when others initiate such conversations with us.

We encounter hard conversations with family, within the church, and with people who don't follow Jesus. They pop up everywhere, and most days, we feel ill-equipped to navigate sensitive subjects the way we truly wish we could. What if we could address those challenges and find ways to have more real conversations about hard things? We can.

As I said in the introduction, hard conversations are hard because they matter. We can let their difficulty deter us or determine us. But Christians do hard things every day, by the power of Jesus Christ. Why should navigating meaningful conversations be any different, especially when we know they can be vehicles for freedom? If a ten-year-old girl can find courage in Christ to speak truth to a disaffected father, we can *all* take heart that Jesus provides what we need to tackle the tough topics in our lives.

ARTWORK

Answer: What were some hard conversations you experienced in childhood? What was the outcome?

Read: God commands us to speak up but holds our listeners responsible for their reaction. What light does Ezekiel 3:10–11 shed on this idea? How can understanding that free us to initiate conversations?

Try: Reframe. I didn't know I was doing it (and I don't recommend telling people they're in a coma), but what God helped me do in childhood was reframe my relationship with my father. Dad's inattention made me feel unloved, but I knew the truth was that he did love me. I chose to live and act in that truth.

We interact daily with people who reject biblical truth, so many of our hard conversations will benefit from reframing.

To reframe, we simply state without judgment what we have observed to be the other person's understanding of the truth. Then clearly say our understanding of truth and explain how that truth informs our actions.

Example: "You've decided to live together without getting married because in our culture, it's become acceptable and seemingly without consequence. You obviously love each other and believe your decision doesn't hurt anyone. It's my perspective that even though many of us do it imperfectly, marriage is sacred. It's my understanding that no matter how it appears, it's better to obey rather than to disobey God. There can be unforeseen consequences from choosing to oppose God's ways. Because of that and the fact that I care about you, I continue to urge you to choose marriage."

Or "You're sad right now and feel like that feeling will never go away. You've been through a lot of hard times and losses, so that's understandable. The truth is, those trials have changed you and altered your life, but you won't always feel this sad, and there are even times of joy ahead of you. Everyone has hardships to endure, but they do end. There is more. And even though you feel as if Jesus has lost sight of you, He hasn't. He isn't done writing your story."

Lesson 2

Swooping Hawks

*Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars
and spreads his wings toward the south?*

(Job 39:26)

Regardless of personality or age, we all would prefer to operate from within our comfort zone, but obedience leads us into uncomfortable territory. Some of us tend to be bold, strong hawks ready to swoop in and carry a conversation on the mighty wings of our opinions and forceful arguments. Others of us, like retreating turtles, prefer to keep our

heads down, nestled into our comfortable shells. Still others resemble camouflaged chameleons, switching back and forth between advance and retreat depending on circumstances.

While each tendency has its strengths, they all have weaknesses. We face tough decisions about obeying Jesus despite our lesser tendencies if we love God and want to follow Him into this kingdom adventure. Right now, we'll look at three different types of typical communication styles—along with how God calls us to communicate. First, the swooping hawk.

For the more zealous among us, it can be challenging to exercise restraint rather than dominate conversations and hope an abundance of words will sway hearts. While there are limits to any analogy, it's helpful to imagine that some of us lean toward being conversational hawks.

Some of us spend decades learning to slow down to the speed of Light.

It's a thing of beauty to watch a hawk swoop toward prey, unless you're the prey. Hawks are swift, but while speed is expedient, it's seldom inspired when it comes to hard conversations. We've all heard of flash conversions, but heart transformation generally requires a sizable investment of time. Some of us spend decades learning to slow down to the speed of Light.

Consider the apostle Peter in Matthew 16:22 trying to dissuade Jesus from prophesying his own suffering, or in John 13 resisting Jesus's foot-washing and insisting he would lay down his life for Him. Peter's passion often drove his words. Some of us hawks see ourselves in Peter or in this sister in Christ who once invited me for coffee. I sat across from the woman who'd invited me out (why is it always over coffee?), cupping my mug with both hands, so she wouldn't notice them shaking. "I'm not sure I understand what you want from me," I said.

Her tone indicated this shouldn't be hard to understand. "As I explained, several of us have noticed you crying in church. It's really affecting our experience of worship," she replied.

I glanced around the coffee shop to see if anyone could overhear. "I've

had a lot of stress recently. My kids are little, and my husband travels so much.”

She nodded. “And so, you see, that’s why we think you should take a break from being involved in ministry.”

“Because I’ve cried during worship?”

“Well, yes, and so that you can tend to your marriage. It clearly needs tending.”

“But Rob’s gone most of the time.”

“Exactly.”

“Help me understand. You’ve noticed my distress, and it bothers you. So, your solution is that I step down and stay home to take better care of a man who isn’t there?”

She nodded, seeming relieved that I finally understood.

I attempted, again, to explain how I felt. “But I especially look forward to interacting with adults during those ministry opportunities. And it’s not likely to change the demands of my husband’s job for me to be home more often.”

“I had a feeling you’d be difficult. Your stubborn attitude and lack of concern about how you’re affecting the rest of us indicates to me this is a spiritual issue. Even more reason you shouldn’t be in any position right now. I’ll discuss this with the team tonight. I was hoping to avoid the discomfort of that. I do hate that you’ve forced me to take it to that level.”

I apologized for being so much trouble.

Though perhaps not evident here, this woman has a real heart for ministering to Christian women. I believe she loves God and wants to serve others, but she’s slow to listen and quick to offer solutions (the opposite of James 1:19–20).

At the time, I was a young wife and mother. Yes, I was struggling, but I was also indulging in self-pity. If I’d felt heard or loved during that conversation, we may have reached a solution together.

It’s embarrassing to admit, but at times, I’ve been both women in this conversation. Here, I was the victim, but at other times, I’ve swooped in with my agenda, ignoring others’ hearts and needs. Maybe you can relate, but seriously, I find removing the log from my own eye a relentless process (Matt. 7:3–5).

There's a place for the swift swoop of a hawk in Christlike conversations, but we're called to be praying people, not preying ones.

ARTWORK

Answer: What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a hawk conversational style? How is it a benefit to the work of furthering the kingdom, and when might it detract from the work?

Read: Consider Peter's declarations in John 13, particularly verses 6–9 and 36–37. How does Jesus respond to Peter? What encouragement can we hawks take from that? What caution?

Try: Listen as others converse around you today (if you're confined to home, try this watching a talk show or movie). Note how others respond to the hawk conversational style. If they were your friends, how might you encourage them?

Lesson 3

Retreating Turtles

But he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." (Exod. 4:13)

I was on staff at a local gym when I walked into our workout room to find one of our regulars sobbing on a moving treadmill. She was a lovely, older woman. Off the treadmill, she relied on a cane, which leaned against the rail. Concerned with her heart and her safety, I hurried over to ask what was wrong.

She shook her head, crying. "I just read one of your blogs."

Panic. I was new to blogging, and word of it had spread through the gym. Most of the regulars weren't Christians, so I forewarned them it was unapologetically a "Jesus" blog, but many couldn't resist a curious peek. "I'm sorry it upset you. What can I do to help?"

She sobbed even more. "Can I know Jesus? Can I get to know Him like you do?"

I panicked. Silently, I prayed, “Jesus, you know I’m a remedial evangelist. This isn’t a proper starting point for a rookie.” Do you ever counsel Jesus? I strongly advise against it. “It doesn’t even seem safe to accept Jesus on a moving treadmill. There must be some other Christian—*any* other Christian—who would be better in this moment than I am. Couldn’t you send one here now?”

Not a prayer I recall with pride.

The gym teemed with onlookers. Conversation bubbles appeared over their heads (I may have imagined this part). They read, “Wow. How’s she going to handle this?” or “She’s not seriously going to pray with this woman right here, is she?”

I wish I could say I mustered my nerve and boldly led this woman to Jesus despite the bizarre circumstances, but the truth is, I couldn’t locate my voice. In that moment, I embodied the Corinthians’ complaint about the apostle Paul: “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account’” (2 Cor. 10:10).

I stopped the treadmill, escorted her to a chair, and quietly provided instructions as to how to follow Jesus. I stopped just shy of anything resembling an invitation to pray there and then. I fell short of that opportunity.

God extended me an invitation to participate in advancing His kingdom, but I hesitated and withdrew into my shell. When presented with the moment, I couldn’t imagine I was the right person for the task, despite God’s clear indication that I was. I missed out. When our hesitation overrides God’s invitation, we opt out of opportunities to shadow our Father in His work.

God leads us into situations and conversations knowing full well our limitations, but He never leaves us without help.

God leads us into situations and conversations knowing full well our limitations, but He never leaves us without help. Moses clearly had turtle tendencies and yet God chose him to confront Pharaoh and to demand he set the Israelites free. God provided Moses with a staff for

courage and Aaron for support. He may call some of us turtles on similarly challenging tasks, but He will provide us what we need as well.

God is eager to include us in the work of furthering His kingdom, guiding Christians into deeper relationship with Him, encouraging and exhorting others to spiritual maturity, and ministering to people in their darkest moments. For our Father, it's always take your son and daughter to work day.

God created a variety of temperaments, some more reserved than others, and we should rejoice in that. If you're reserved or given to few words, embrace God's design. But none of us should use our design as an excuse to avoid engaging in kingdom work. God created turtles with shells, but we can stick our necks out, as easily as we can retract them.

ARTWORK

Answer: What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a turtle conversational style? How is it a benefit to the work of furthering the kingdom, and when might it detract from the work?

Read: Read about Moses's struggle in Exodus 4:1–17. What about this conversation surprises you? What comfort can we turtles take from God's response to Moses? What warning?

Try: Listen to conversations around you again today, but this time, pay attention to those who are speaking less than others. What can you tell from observing turtles? How do people respond to them? If they were your friends, how might you encourage them?

Lesson 4

Camouflaged Chameleons

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. (1 Cor. 9:22)

The lunch crowd at my old office was an opinionated bunch. I found it intimidating and appreciated that one of the other staff also seemed

to remain quiet during what could be heated debates on headlines. I saw another side of this staffer one day, though, when someone wondered aloud, “What kinds of people would sink to relying on government programs for food and shelter?”

“I’m ‘those kinds of people,’” she said quietly but firmly.

“Excuse me?” someone asked, as everyone looked her way.

“I said that I’m one of ‘those kinds of people.’ Some of us have no one to fall back on. After my husband left, I had to consider my kids, not my pride. Tom, didn’t you and your wife move in with your parents this year? And, Julia, your father cosigned for your car. I don’t have help, so I rely on a government program. I don’t know what kind of person that makes me, but here I am, having lunch with all of you.”

After lunch, I spoke admiringly of what she had said, and I asked where she had found the courage. I was impressed with her reply. “Most days, I don’t want to add to the noise. But today I noticed two other staff in that room who live in affordable housing and rely on food stamps. I could see them getting hurt. The others just forgot for a moment that they’re not actually unkind people. I simply reminded them who they are.”

Chameleons modify our style without compromising our message.

This woman normally retreats from controversy, but in this area, she chose to be bold—like a conversational chameleon—in order to serve others. The apostle Paul set an example of someone who yielded his personal communication-style preference to serve those he was sent to reach with the message of Jesus Christ. He describes this best in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I

became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

No one would ever accuse Paul of being wishy-washy, and he clarifies in these verses the difference between style of message and content. According to the current situational need, chameleons modify our style without compromising our message. It takes thought and prayer, but it's possible and a worthwhile practice to cultivate.

Maybe you're a chameleon—sometimes hawk, other times turtle depending on the situation and audience. Chameleons vary our delivery, muting or magnifying ourselves depending on a variety of factors. We're shy about certain topics, bold about others or when properly motivated.

When you think about it, with such diverse conversational styles, it's a wonder any of us manage to communicate. Still, we have hope because we follow the one who is the Word. Identifying how we tend to approach hard conversations is the first step toward improving in the art of hard conversations.

ARTWORK

Answer: What is the advantage of being a conversational chameleon? What's the most challenging aspect? How is it a benefit to the work of furthering the kingdom, and when might it detract from the work?

Read: Paul was a committed chameleon. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 again. Then read Acts 17 to watch Paul in action engaging with three different communities.

Try: Embrace your design. Even when we repent of sin, we still don't look and act exactly alike. We can embrace God's unique idea of us. He designed each one with a personality, skills, strengths, and talents. He placed us in a time, culture, ethnicity, and family structure (Acts 17:26). When was the last time, rather than complaining about yourself to Him, you celebrated His idea of you as a form of praise? No time like now.

Lesson 5

A Nose Is Not an Eye

If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (1 Cor. 12:15)

Interdependence is hardwired into God's design of the church. We resist it to our own loss.

My eyes glazed over as I struggled to pay attention as the financial chairperson talked about putting together a compensation package for our pastoral candidate. When he finished, he asked if we all had any questions.

"You lost me about five minutes in," I replied. "I'm sorry. I'm useless on this topic."

He laughed. "You look the way I felt back when we were creating the job description and you tried to explain inerrancy of Scripture."

Someone else piped up. "I love how we work together. Everyone has something different to offer. No one needs to be an expert on everything."

People are different. That should be a celebration, not a complaint. We appreciate variations on themes in nature, art, music, and other aspects of life. When it comes to communication, we forget we're free to revel in variety there too.

Our perspectives are so diverse, in fact, we even vary in what we would classify as hard conversations. A turtle may consider sharing his faith or debating a controversial or hard topic but be very comfortable conversing with the sick or comforting the dying. On the other hand, a hawk may thrive on defending the faith or confronting a false theology but balk at letting loved ones know how deeply they're valued. Chameleons rise and retreat as the situation demands. The kingdom benefits from this variety.

There's much to admire about hawks, turtles, and chameleons. God used Moses, Peter, and Paul. We need them all. Hawks keep the church talking and engaging with a boldness and certainty that inspires confi-

dence. Turtles demonstrate necessary restraint and sensitivity, leading to an approachability that is valuable in outreach. Chameleons pay attention to cultural and situational differences that can inform the rest of us. Each style also has obvious drawbacks, but these drawbacks require us all to rely on Jesus.

While we encounter different hurdles, strategies for clearing them are something we can share. Spiritual maturity plays a role in this dynamic, but there are skills we can learn and steps we can take to improve everyone's experience discussing sensitive subjects.

It will never be easy, this side of glory. Hard conversations are likely to be hard, by their very definition, until we're home with God. But we can improve. We can all grow.

God knows who we are. He understands what we're made of. He embraces variety and appears to delight in working through us. More glory to Him, when He chooses the least likely among us to tackle the hardest topics.

Allow me to offer some assurance before we proceed.

The miracle of the church is that becoming more like Jesus doesn't make us identical but brings out the grain in our individual design.

Remember that the ways of God, while often challenging, are also gracious and kind. God loves you and your personality. The miracle of the church is that becoming more like Jesus doesn't make us identical but brings out the grain in our individual design. He is patient with all our starts and stops. Be patient with yourself and others through these lessons.

And rest assured, the art of conversation is not all about the words. I've learned from paying attention to Jesus that the truth of Ecclesiastes 3:1 also applies to hard conversations. There's a time for everything. There's a time to speak and a time to remain silent. A time to utter words and a time to listen. A time to engage in dialogue and a time to instruct. A time to talk and a time to pray. A time to hear and a time to act.

Our faith isn't in words or conversations, but in the power of Christ. Words are just one vehicle for representing Him.

It's a mystery how God works through us—hawks, turtles, chameleons, and all the rest. Not a mystery to solve, but one to explore—together.

ARTWORK

Answer: Think of times when you felt integral to or valued by the body of Christ. What contributed to this sense of belonging? How do you convey this to others?

Read: What does 1 Corinthians 12:12–31 say about why God chose to design the church with varied parts? What effect would there be if we all tried to be the same part?

Try: Start with a specific blessing. For some, hard conversations aren't the corrective ones, but the ones that feel too personal. And yet, if we make a habit of building up with our words, it lays a stronger foundation for the times we must confront. Before you start having hard conversations, exercise the habit of verbally blessing by encouraging others using specific observations.

“You're valued here at our church” is nice (and if that's what you've got, please go with that). But consider finding a personal comment, such as, “I've noticed how patient you are when managing your young children during the service.” Or “You were kind to help Mr. Edwards to his seat.” Or “It took courage to open up and tell our group what you've been facing.”

The groundwork for hard conversations occurs more naturally when we've also used words to praise and encourage. When was the last time you verbally encouraged someone in your life who is different than you? How would your community be enriched if this was a common practice? Ask God to show you a way to offer a specific blessing to someone this week.

HEART OF THE ART PRACTICE

Read Exodus 3 and 4. Ask someone you trust to describe your conversational style. Listen. Don't interrupt or challenge any observations. Thank that person for honest feedback. What did you hear said?