

AN ESSENTIAL
Guide to
Interpersonal
Communication

BUILDING GREAT RELATIONSHIPS
with FAITH, SKILL, AND VIRTUE in the
AGE *of* SOCIAL MEDIA

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2015 by Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M. Badzinski

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schultze, Quentin J. (Quentin James), 1952–

An essential guide to interpersonal communication : building great relationships with faith, skill, and virtue in the age of social media / Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M. Badzinski.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3894-5 (pbk.)

1. Interpersonal communication—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Social media—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4597.53.C64S38 2015

248.4—dc23

2015016405

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15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Acknowledgments

While working on this book for five years, we piled up so many debts to so many people that we hardly know where to begin acknowledging them. Probably the place to start is with our students at Colorado Christian University, Calvin College, and Spring Arbor University. They were our first and best audience for trying out our ideas. They also kept our minds on the intended audience for the book, helping us avoid language that was overly academic or unengaging. Thanks to all of them for encouraging us as teachers as well as scholar-writers.

Colleagues and friends reviewed various versions of the manuscript and gave us remarkably good advice. In fact, we rewrote the manuscript significantly because of the time they dedicated to serving our readers and us. These dedicated souls include Robert Woods, Bill Strom, Paul Soukup, Em Griffin, G. L. Forward, Tim Muehlhoff, Stephanie Bennett, and Ron Welch.

Calvin College provided one of us (Quentin Schultze) with a sabbatical leave to work on this book. Without that support, we would still be struggling to find time for conducting last-minute research on social media and actually writing the manuscript.

We're grateful for Baker Publishing Group's enthusiastic support for this project. Bob Hosack moved our proposal through the review process at record speed. Arika Theule-Van Dam masterfully edited the manuscript with the help of her colleague Gisèle Mix. Paula

Gibson's art team did a terrific job; we liked the cover immediately. Kara Day, Bryan Dyer, Mason Slater, and the rest of the marketing team were helpful and effective throughout the process. Baker was a joy to work with. Thanks to all.

Our spouses and children sometimes got the short end of the stick as we worked evenings and weekends. We greatly appreciate their understanding and love.

Introduction

We wrote this book for everyone who wants to enjoy great relationships in our technological age. We wrote it for people of faith who desire relationships that are a taste of heaven on earth.

New communication technologies come and go, but the essentials of great communication never change. Today communication students often are introduced to the ancient art of *rhetoric* (persuasion) but rarely hear about the communication-related wisdom in, for instance, the Old Testament book of Proverbs or the New Testament book of James. Throughout history, theologians developed profound biblical insights about human communication that can be applied even to the newest communication technologies.

Consider this age-old saying attributed to medieval monks: “Speak only if you can improve upon the silence.” (Possible interpretations: “God has already spoken. Can you do better?” or “Don’t be a fool by putting your foot in your mouth.”) This saying addresses the wisdom of listening and the importance of silence. Today we might say, “Text a message only if you can improve upon a blank screen.”

Also ponder this adage, credited to St. Augustine of Hippo: “A Christian should be an alleluia from head to toe.” (Possible interpretation: “Be grateful to God, and let your gratitude shape everything you do, including all communication in all media.”)

We have written this book to help people practice the enduring essentials of interpersonal communication in the age of social media and through the lens of Christian wisdom. Our book is a practical and inspiring guide for being a faithful as well as an effective communicator in today's multimedia world.

The two of us are communication scholars and teachers. We use high-tech and high-touch media. We love reading good books, so we aimed to write one that others would delight in reading and discussing.

Although we are both Christians, we realize along with St. Augustine that all truth is God's truth. One doesn't have to be a Christian or even religious to discover great principles about communicating well. Social science has taught the two of us a lot about interpersonal communication, especially in the last thirty years; we share some of those findings in this book, especially recent research on the impact of social media on relationships. Given our faith commitments, however, we are especially attuned to how Christian Scripture and theology reveal the essentials of great interpersonal communication. We wrote this book primarily as a supplemental or stand-alone text for use in Christian colleges, universities, seminaries, and churches.

A key word in each chapter title—such as “listen” and “peace”—refers to a concept in the field of interpersonal communication. Also, we italicize key terms throughout the book and provide a definition within the same or a nearby sentence. The chapters build consecutively upon each other. We start with “Be Grateful,” which shows that communicators' attitudes fundamentally shape how they perceive and treat others. From a Christian perspective, the foundational attitude for communication is gratitude.

In the second chapter, “Listen Attentively,” we discuss the importance of listening, which is paying attention to reality through all of the available media. As we become better listeners, we get to know others more personally, sometimes even intimately. But we live in such noisy, high-traffic times—filled with video, audio, and text—that it can be difficult to stay focused. Listening helps transform the chaotic messaging of everyday life into rewarding friendships.

In chapter 3, “Single-Task,” we explain why multitasking is not usually compatible with great interpersonal communication. The newest, fastest communication technologies will not necessarily

improve our communication. Too often, high-tech communication distracts us rather than connects us to others; every message alert seems equally worthy of our attention and prevents us from fully engaging with other individuals and groups.

In the fourth chapter, “Know Yourself,” we explain how important it is for us to know both our self-identities and our social identities. Often our self-identities—our views of ourselves—are distorted. After all, when we look into a mirror or snap a photo of ourselves, we want to make ourselves look good. That’s not all bad. But our real self-identities are not so neat and clean. Image-editing software like Photoshop can’t erase our two relationship-robbing tendencies: (1) to hide from others (we call it *cocooning*) and (2) to put down others (we call it *criticizing*). These practices then negatively affect our social identities—how others view us.

In chapter 5, “Relate Openly,” we look at the importance of being truthful and true to one another. Authentic persons say what they mean and mean what they say. *Self-disclosure* (revealing what we really think or feel) can be risky since others might be critical of us or even reject us. But if we lie, we reduce others’ trust in us. From a Christian perspective, authenticity is a kind of mutual faithfulness in which each party knows “where” the other person truly is in the relationship.

In chapter 6, “Encourage Others,” we address a profoundly important type of interpersonal communication: encouragement. In order to flourish in relationships we need both inner resources, like self-motivation, and outer resources, such as heartening words from friends, family, and God. In Scripture, encouragement is one of the most frequently used means of building people up and helping them avoid *discouragement* (a lack of courage to go on in the face of past or feared disappointment). One of the blessings of social media is that they can provide additional ways for us to disclose our discouragement and offer others encouragement.

In chapter 7, “Promote Peace,” we look at the inevitable conflict that arises in relationships and suggest a biblical model for peace based on the Hebrew ideal of *shalom*—justice and peace based on right relations. After revealing myths about interpersonal conflicts—such as the myth that verbal conflict is far less relationally significant than

physical conflict—we describe biblical peace as lives that are rich with community and hope rather than just with the absence of negative conflicts. By living well relationally with the help of the Spirit, people can flourish together in peace, pointing each other toward the new heaven and new earth that God is preparing for the eternal kingdom.

In the last chapter before the conclusion, “Restore Relationships,” we explore how we can faithfully address broken relationships. Of course God’s forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel. So this chapter explores how and when to practice forgiveness, recognizing that rebuilding some torn-apart relationships is not easy and requires plenty of patience and grace.

In the concluding chapter we return to the topic of gratitude, calling for a kind of celebration of relationships in the age of social media. We suggest that older and newer media—from speaking to texting—are all signs of the “opening up” of creation, designed to equip us with the means to experience greater joy and delight. When it comes to interpersonal communication, there are not good and bad media. Instead, God offers us an expanding array of media so that we can discover and enjoy the most fitting media for particular situations. *Fittingness*—or “appropriateness”—ought to be our guide in everyday interpersonal discourse. One interesting implication of our perspective is that we need to make sure we don’t lose some older “media” of communication—such as engaging in mealtime conversation, walking and hiking, playing board games, and taking vacations with family or road trips with friends—that can still play a fitting role in building great relationships. We offer a balanced perspective with plenty of hope and encouragement.

Practicing communication well is essential because it fosters humans’ three main types of relationships: our relationships with God, with others (our biblical “neighbors”), and with ourselves. As we show across these chapters, mastering interpersonal communication is all about nurturing those three relationships simultaneously through appropriate media.

Finally, we indicate throughout the book that the quality of human relationships depends on a combination of *faith* (whom we trust and follow), *skill* (how we interact with God, others, and ourselves), and *virtue* (the qualities of our character—or the habits of our heart).

By focusing in this book on all three—faith, skill, and virtue—we show how to flourish in life-giving relationships filled with joy and delight. Even more than that, we offer samples from the kingdom feast that is already being prepared for us but seems missing in the noisy networks of everyday life.

So what really distinguishes our vision for interpersonal communication from that of other books is the God-given potential in human beings to overcome their selfish tendencies and to form life-giving relationships filled with joy and delight. People's hard work along with God's surprising grace can transform everyone's relationships into heavenly signs of hope. We hope that all readers will begin to flourish anew as they discover what God has in store for their relationships.

One of the communication professors who read an early manuscript of this book was moved to reach out in love to an estranged sibling. They had not spoken for years as resentments had piled up in their heads. Then one kind, inviting email turned that relationship around. Soon the siblings, living in different parts of the country, met in person with plenty of hugs and kisses. It was the first time in twenty-five years that the siblings and parents had shared a meal together. This is how God renews our relationships—one message at a time. And one book at a time. May this book continue to sow seeds of relational renewal for many more people, so that they can flourish like flowers on a warm spring morning.

Thanks for listening.

1



BE GRATEFUL

In a live television interview, comedian Louis C. K. said that in today's technological world "everything's amazing and nobody's happy." He joked that airline passengers complain about having to wait on runways. "Oh really, well what happened next? Did you fly through the air incredibly, like a bird? Did you partake in the miracle of human flight? . . . Everybody on every plane should just constantly be going 'OH . . . WOW.' You're sitting in a chair in the sky."¹

We all take much for granted. And we quickly complain when we're inconvenienced by something as insignificant as a slow internet connection or a dropped cell call.

Yet one of the most amazing gifts we take for granted is our ability to communicate. Human communication isn't just about sending and receiving messages. It's about sharing our lives. It's about friendship rather than loneliness. It's about flourishing in community, including *interpersonal* (person-to-person) relationships with family and friends.

In this chapter we look at the most important attitude that should shape all of our communication: gratitude. Great interpersonal

communication begins and ends with gratitude, which flows from a grateful heart. We should give thanks for the gift of communication, for having other people to relate to, for being able to commune especially with God, and for all of those who led the way for us by teaching and modeling grateful communication. Without the gift of communication we would have no relationships and therefore no community life. By God's grace, made in his image, we possess a phenomenal capacity to build great relationships. This is why the most important attitude is exactly what Louis C. K. bantered about—gratitude.

Being Grateful

Heartfelt gratitude is the best way to begin communicating with others. This includes gratitude for the gift giver (God), for those we communicate with, and for the gift of communication that equips us to relate to others. We should rightly give thanks for people such as family and teachers who taught us about communication and modeled it for us, and for the people who created the communication technologies we depend on daily. Louis C. K. rightly gave thanks for the miracle of flight, but he could have just as appropriately given thanks to the people who invented the technology and the professionals who serve the airline.

Heartfelt gratitude naturally leads us to be less selfish and more servant-oriented. When we accept our own communicative ability as a gift from God and then desire in our hearts to use the gift to love and serve others, we are well on our way to becoming faithful interpersonal communicators. Spiritual theologian James M. Houston writes, "The heart is the source of all the attitudes that go to make up a person."² Our hearts form our character and direct our communication.

Priest Thomas á Kempis copied the Bible by hand no fewer than four times before writing *The Imitation of Christ*, probably the most popular Christian book of all time except for the Bible. He says, "A wise lover considers not so much the lover's gift as the giver's love."³ He adds, "A barrage of words does not make the soul happy, but a

pure conscience generates a bountiful confidence in God.”⁴ The more we honestly love God, the more our words will help us love others and ourselves. “A true Christian,” writes Scottish theologian John Baillie, “is one who never for a moment forgets what God has done for him in Christ, and whose whole comportment and whole activity have their roots in the sentiment of gratitude.”⁵

Modeling the Right Attitude

Our hearts can hold three basic attitudes toward others: displeasure, indifference, and gratitude. These shape how we communicate with one another and especially how others perceive us.

Displeased communicators tire us with complaints and criticisms. Their hearts say to others, “You don’t live up to my standards” and “I’m better than you are.” We generally avoid such people unless we’re likewise discontented persons. Negative people attract one another. Grumblers gather to commiserate. Louis C. K. reminds us how easily we grumble about inconveniences while forgetting the underlying miracles.

Indifferent communicators wear us out with apathy and inertia. Their hearts say to others, “Whatever.” It’s hard to get to know such people well because they don’t work at developing close relationships. They live superficially.

SIX TYPES OF COMMUNICATORS FOR WHICH TO GIVE THANKS

1. Encouragers—who build us up
2. Advocates—who speak up on our behalf
3. Listeners—who care about our thoughts and feelings
4. Storytellers—who give us joy and delight
5. Forgivers—who make things right when we’re wrong
6. Challengers—who ask appropriate questions about our communication

Grateful communicators welcome us into their lives, encourage us, and direct us toward affirming relationships. Their warm hearts say to others, “You are a gift. I care about you.” We naturally want to care about them in return.

Grateful communicators in every medium speak appreciatively. They avoid language that reflects ingratitude or indifference, such as “whatever,” “who cares,” and “so what.” Instead, they look for opportunities to compliment others and to remind them how much they are valued, even for the “little things.” Often one or two words of genuine gratitude will make another person’s day. “Thanks for your kind words.” “I appreciate the way you listen to me.” “Your encouragement means a lot to me.” Even a simple text message of thanks can bless the recipient.

Ungrateful communicators, on the other hand, spread complaints through their networks of friends and family. The people of Israel grumbled against the very God who delivered them from Egypt.⁶ They griped about God’s seemingly lousy leadership. They complained about inadequate provisions. They questioned God’s presence and power.⁷ The exodus story links the Israelites’ murmurings against God with their failure to remain faithful.⁸

Our gratitude begins evaporating when we overlook God’s grace and start groaning about our circumstances and criticizing others. We may find temporary joy in putting down others and grumbling about God, but such a lousy attitude will squelch our ability to form joy-filled, lasting relationships.

Embracing Thankfulness

In the Hebrew and Christian traditions, real appreciation is a life-shaping attitude that grows in our hearts as we praise God *in* all things and give thanks to God *for* all good things. Believing in God is one thing. Being wholeheartedly grateful to God is much more. As the writer of Proverbs puts it, such gratefulness leads us to write mercy and truth “on the tablet of [our] heart.”⁹ Rabbi Abraham Heschel, a leading Jewish theologian of the twentieth century, says, “The truth of being human is gratitude; its secret is appreciation.”¹⁰

Can we truly communicate out of love for others if we lack appreciativeness? Not really. Gratitude is our first blessing, which in turn makes us a blessing to others. It's our emotional home in the presence of God. When we're ungrateful, we lack a loving home and cannot love others.¹¹ The words "gratitude" and "grace" spring from the same Latin root. God's love-drenched grace inspires us—through the work of the Spirit—to give thanks to God and in return to love others as well as ourselves.

Gratitude leads us away from selfish communication and toward mutually beneficial relationships. Robert Emmons, author of *Thanks!*, says that gratitude "implies humility—a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contributions of others."¹² The highly influential twentieth-century German theologian Karl Barth writes, "God's grace and our gratitude go together like 'heaven on earth.'"¹³ The apostle Paul proclaims, "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."¹⁴ Gratitude is foundational for relational flourishing.

Communication skills are important but insufficient for strong interpersonal relationships. Without gratitude, our interpersonal communication tends to deform our relationships. We expect from others far more than we offer them. Acclaimed Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga says, "The initial difference between believer and demon is a matter of affections: the former is inspired to gratitude and love, the latter to fear, hatred, and contempt."¹⁵ Generally speaking, religiously and spiritually engaged people are more grateful people.¹⁶ Grateful people, in turn, are more likely to engage in religious and spiritual activities.¹⁷ Our hearts and our relational skills are intimately connected to our faith; our skills spread the messages of our hearts throughout our social networks.

Communing with God

As followers of Jesus Christ, we're never really alone. Even when we talk to ourselves, God is with us, listening and sending the Holy Spirit to motivate, encourage, and console us. Our communication—or communion—with God sets the stage for all of our other relationships.

God is present to serve us even in our inadequate communication and unsatisfactory relationships. God doesn't abandon us even if we've already spent years learning bad communication habits and living in unsatisfying or abusive relationships. God doesn't leave us alone to try to change hearts and habits just by reading self-help books or taking communication workshops. Instead, God invites us to experience his love and thereby to begin experiencing renewed relationships with him and with others—over and over again.

Moreover, we have no idea how much misunderstanding and how many conflicts God has already helped us through. In the last week alone, we've all communicated with many people but probably suffered few emotionally debilitating conflicts. God has been intervening on our behalf all along. God has been making our communication happen through the work of the Spirit. In a sense, God has been sustaining our relationships with friends, family, and colleagues in spite of our inadequacies.

In other words, the burden for our own interpersonal communication never rests solely on our own shoulders. We share it with the Creator God who gave us the gift of communication and who through the Spirit keeps inviting us into relationships with Jesus and other people (our biblical "neighbors"). All of our successful communication with everyone is a gift from God. God's grace makes it happen. The wonderfully gifted fiction writer Flannery O'Connor, who struggled to learn how to pray, observes, "All of my requests seem to melt down to one for grace."¹⁸ With grace comes gratitude.

Responding to God's Grace

In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 17, ten lepers approach Jesus for healing. They yearn to break free from their isolation on the margins of society. Jesus complies, making them whole. But only one of the lepers subsequently thanks his healer. A lone leper, a despised Samaritan, turns back to Jesus, kneels at the Lord's feet, thanks him, and loudly praises him.

Thus begins a new relationship between God and a child of God, and soon between that former leper and his growing relationships

with other persons. Thus emerges a new heart of gratitude, reflected in words of praise. Thus commences a life of faithful communication. We would do well to imitate the leper's grateful communication.

Struggling to discern if it was God's will for her to give thanks for a disease that hardened her skin and internal organs, Marcia pledged, with brutal honesty, "God, I've never lied to you before and I'm not going to start now. There's no way I can thank you for this life-robbing, painful disease or the fact that I'm not going to see my grandchildren grow up. But I will thank you for the things for which I'm truly grateful."¹⁹ She focused on what she could give thanks for, not just on the personal concerns that could diminish her gratitude and tarnish her relationships.

Most astonishing is Marcia's subsequent journal entry: "One morning as I was thinking of things I was thankful for, without even realizing it I heard myself say, 'God, thank you for this disease that's brought me so much closer to you!'"²⁰ Marcia courageously communed with God, even in the midst of her life-robbing illness. Faithfully employing the gift of communication, she rediscovered gratitude in grace and faith in gratitude.

Communing in Community

What are human beings for? What's our purpose on earth?

Our greatest calling is to glorify Jesus and enjoy God forever. In other words, we're designed for worshipful living. Our lives are meant to be fragrant offerings to Jesus Christ. We're here to love and serve in life-affirming relationships—in communities—with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. "No man is an island," writes John Donne, a seventeenth-century English poet, lawyer, and priest.²¹ The word "communication" stems from the same Latin root as the words "community" and "communion," meaning to share, to have things in common, and to experience fellowship.²²

In the early church, persecuted believers gathered secretly to celebrate their unity in Christ primarily by "communing" together in the Lord's Supper. Participating in the sacrament became a way of forming a faith community. Each believer was an individual who shared with others a

common faith in God. Similarly, each of us maintains our own God-given uniqueness even as we share our lives with others. Like each person in the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—every human being is a separate person united in community with other unique persons.

Jackie Turner, age twenty-six, so desired community that she posted an ad on Craigslist asking to rent a family for a holiday—at \$8.00 an hour. Although some families invited her to join them for free, she unexpectedly received so many responses from similarly lonely individuals that she decided to start a new family. Rather than renting a family, Turner contacted those who also wanted a home for the holiday and gathered with them to celebrate.²³

Every one of our interpersonal relationships is grounded in communication and carries the potential for community. Our relationships live in communication. Without communication, they die. Interpersonal communication is all about gratefully nurturing, repairing, and celebrating life-giving relationships. All of our work and play depends on such communication-formed relationships. In a sense, the gift of communication is a love letter from God that invites us into community with the Trinity, one another, and ourselves. This is why our most rewarding interpersonal relationships are a taste of heaven on earth.

Imitating Grateful People

Because communication and community are so intimately connected, we tend to become like the people we spend time with. In other words, our relationships significantly form our own hearts and direct our own words.

So becoming a more faithful, God-serving, neighbor-loving interpersonal communicator requires us to choose our friends wisely. The people we intentionally or unintentionally imitate shape the kind of person we are. To be grateful persons, we need to network with thankful people.

Today we tend to think about interpersonal communication in terms of effective techniques or skills. But also critically important are our *virtues*—our intrinsically good qualities of character. We

can't really separate ourselves as persons from our own messages; we are part of the message, not just the messengers. In others' eyes, we are viewed somewhat in terms of our apparent character—not just according to what we literarily say, write, or post online.

Moreover, by being virtuous with others we can create nurturing relationships together. As communication scholar Bill Strom puts it in *The Relationship Project*, we learn “virtuous relating.”²⁴

We learn much about communication from imitation. This is why we need *saintly* (virtuous and faithful) role models that will demonstrate grateful communication. A saintly person acknowledges her or his debt to the cross and is genuinely committed to being Jesus's salt and light in God's world. They are living gratitude. They aim to communicate faithfully, not just skillfully.

Like all other past and present Christians, we're learning daily how to communicate with faith, skill, and virtue. We're figuring out how to be saintly ourselves. We're practicing what it means to be holy rather than just effective communicators. We look to God's Word for guidance. We study the wisdom about communication that we can learn from saints like á Kempis. And we look to the saints in our midst at work, play, home, and worship to show us how to communicate well. In other words, the gift of communication equips us to learn from saintly people how we can be faithful and virtuous as well as skillful communicators.

You will be a far better communicator if you regularly acknowledge and express appreciation to persons who have modeled for you how to communicate gratefully with faith, skill, and virtue. Then ask God to bless them. Consider parents, grandparents, friends, teachers, pastors, coworkers or bosses, and anyone else who served you by demonstrating saintly communication.

Conclusion

Communication skills are essential for building rich and rewarding interpersonal relationships. But first we need the foundation of gratitude because our communication ultimately flows from our hearts. The right attitude is essential. We grow gratitude in our hearts when

we network with God and other grateful people. We sour our attitude and tarnish our communication when we tag along with complainers and grumblers.

The more grateful we are, the more deeply we'll love God, neighbor, and self. As author Esther de Waal puts it in a book on spirituality, living gratefully helps us to "see with love and delight, with wonder and tenderness, and above all with gratitude."²⁵ Comedian Louis C. K. rightly chided his television audience for being ungrateful in the face of so many "miracles" of modern technology. But even more miraculous is the very gift of communication bestowed upon us by a communicating God who invites us into a grateful community with him and others.

In the next chapter we explain what listening is and how to practice it well so that we can offer our grateful hearts to others in service. Listening is how we get to know others as we learn to call them friends, just as Jesus Christ calls us his friends. Only by listening well can we build flourishing relationships.