Learning to
LISTEN, SPEAK, TEXT, and INTERACT
as a Christian

COMMUNICATING
with GRACE and VIRTUE

Quentin J. Schultze
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Introduction

I once spoke at a Christian university chapel service about how difficult it was for me as a child to communicate with an alcoholic father and a schizophrenic mother. It was the first time I publicly discussed my painful childhood.

Students lined up to speak with me privately after my address. Some tried to hide their tears. Each one told me that family issues made it difficult for them to form deep relationships at college. Even juniors and seniors said that they felt lonely. Some students revealed their depression and anxiety. By speaking transparently about my struggles, I gave them courage to open their hearts about their own.

I knew that I wanted to write this book to help Christians discover the joy of communicating well in spite of fear, loneliness, and brokenness. We all experience challenges that we tend to hide from others instead of seeking healing. I asked God for the courage to write this book, but it still took me decades to be comfortable enough with my own brokenness that I could step out in faith.
In this book I offer many practical tips and engaging examples, often from my own life. Studying communication at a university made me more self-confident. When friends shared the gospel with me, I began integrating my study of communication with my faith in Jesus Christ. I discovered that Scripture offers life-changing communication advice. Step by step, with help and encouragement from others, I learned how to communicate well, both personally and professionally. You can too.

I earned graduate degrees, became a professor of communication, and taught at various Christian universities and seminaries. I also worked as an advertising copywriter, TV and film critic, internet communications consultant, author, and mentor. Grateful to God for each opportunity, I felt called to help others communicate well.


Why are we not able to communicate better? Are we lazy? Confused? Unskilled? Are our motives warped? All of the above—and more. But our personal brokenness as communicators is not the end of our story.

God offers us the gift of communication so we can serve him and one another. I call it servant communication. This book explains servant communication as a way of using God’s gift of communication to love God and our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:30–31). When we put servant communication into action, we serve others as we would like.
to be served. We build healthy relationships. We thrive in homes, businesses, classrooms, and churches. We can even climb out of our difficult pasts and discover the joy of open, honest relationships.

Like Old Testament writers, I use the word “shalom” to describe such healthy relationships. I increasingly discovered shalom in my own life as I learned to communicate well. Both professionally and personally, I became a servant communicator, orienting my heart and mind to the love of God, neighbor, and self. Each chapter in this book addresses an aspect of servant communication.

Chapter 1 invites you to accept the call to servant communication, one of the most important skills one can learn in life. Communication is a calling that we all inherit as followers of Jesus Christ. I explore the wide range of communication-related careers and academic majors to show how essential communication really is. God creates for us what communication professor Ryan Montague calls “divine opportunities,” even in our everyday conversations.

Chapter 2 addresses the heart of servant communication: gratitude. Scripture says that our words flow from our hearts (Luke 6:45). The more grateful we are, the more we will communicate as neighbor-loving persons rather than self-serving persons. Gratefulness nurtures our desire to use the gift of communication to serve God and neighbors—and to avoid relationships, jobs, and sometimes even churches that make us cynical and critical.

Chapter 3 addresses our responsibility to God. We are created to communicate responsibly in God’s name. We are God’s caretakers of language, which we can use to care for others with excellence and compassion. “Christian communication” is excellent and compassionate communication.
Chapter 4 examines our brokenness as communicators. We are not merely imperfect communicators; we are sinful ones. We avoid others, lie, and blame. We sin individually and collectively, in small groups and in large organizations. Along the way, we hide our real feelings from others. My parents and I lived in a sin-wrecked family. I had no idea how to serve them—what to say or how to say it. I stopped listening and just criticized them for years.

Chapter 5 relates communication to community, especially shalom. Created in the image and likeness of our triune God, we are designed to live in healthy, life-giving relationships. How we communicate with one another is vitally important for the quality of our shared lives. Servant communication equips us to flourish in communities of shalom.

Chapter 6 considers the importance of personal character in our communication. We communicate as distinct persons, not just for specific goals. Our character speaks. The more Christlike we become, the more we contribute to shalom. I examine some of the fruit of the Spirit as God-given, communication-related virtues. Our character might be our primary witness to the world. Jesus says that we should be known by our love, the essence of Christlikeness (John 13:35).

Chapter 7 examines storytelling, probably the most powerful form of communication. Many of Jesus’s teachings were stories (parables). The Bible is the story of God and his people, from the beginning of time forward. Popular culture—represented in media such as movies and TV series—sometimes competes with the gospel, like dueling storytellers. Those who control popular stories in a culture generally have the greatest influence on our values, beliefs, and behaviors. As servant communicators, we can learn how
to tell stories well so we can gain people’s attention, engage culture, and share our faith.

Chapter 8 looks at communication technologies. More and more of our everyday communication is mediated through digital devices, especially the smartphone. In one sense, new technologies are part of the opening up of God’s original creation, offering us new opportunities to love and serve one another. Yet the same technologies can consume too much of our time and lead us to become compulsive users. Writer Stephen King calls the smartphone a “twenty-first-century slave bracelet.” As servant communicators, we can wisely adapt technologies for good purposes, fitting our messages with appropriate media.

The biblical themes in this book have long been addressed by servant communicators. I love this ancient monastic saying: “Speak only if you can improve upon the silence.” Author Henri Nouwen says that the desert monks who practiced vows of silence “did not think of solitude as being alone, but as being alone with God.” Imagine the potential impact of such age-old wisdom on today’s public discourse, especially politics and journalism. We can learn about communication both from Scripture and from other servant communicators throughout history.

Readers will discover my enormous debt to St. Augustine of Hippo. I read two of his books annually: On Christian Teaching (or Doctrine) and Confessions. Augustine was trained as a rhetorician (public persuader) before he became a Christian. At first, he wondered if he could be a Christian and a professional communicator at the same time. Fortunately for us, he not only concluded that he could but he also proceeded to write books and sermons that addressed biblical truths about communication.
As I explain in later chapters, one of the great blessings of the gift of language is that we can communicate through history and across generations. With biblical discernment, we can distinguish between what church historian Jaroslav Pelikan calls *tradition* (the living faith of the dead) and *traditionism* (the dead faith of the living). We Christians negotiate all of our discernment through communication with God, one another, and ourselves. It is a stunning gift that we generally take for granted.

If you wish to contact me, please visit my website at www.quentinschultze.com. There you can also find multimedia materials for use with this book and others I have written, including materials for instructors and group leaders.

I am still surprised that I became a communication scholar and teacher. I believe that God directed me to study communication both to renew my own life and to use me to teach others how to communicate with grace and virtue. Communication is a wonderful gift. I gratefully accept it and seek to use it wisely as a caretaker of God’s Word and world. That is why I began speaking openly about my life challenges and why I thank God for every person who courageously shares their heart with me after my speeches. Thank you for joining me on this journey of becoming a servant communicator. I pray that you will be surprised by joy along the way.
Accept the Call

Now when the LORD spoke to Moses in Egypt, he said to him, “I am the LORD. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you.” But Moses said to the LORD, “Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?”

—Exodus 6:28–30

My life has been both challenging and rewarding. My father was an alcoholic and my mother was a paranoid schizophrenic. In high school, I never attended a social event. I was too socially awkward and introverted. I had only one date; her parents told me never to ask her out again.

While I was studying communication at a university, some friends shared the gospel with me. I learned, as Henri Nouwen puts it, that “conversion is the individual equivalent of...
revolution.” My new faith in Jesus Christ gave me hope. Studying Scripture and communication at the same time became a wonderful blessing—a double revolution in my life. I was like an explorer in a new land of grace, reporting to friends what I was discovering about God, communication, and myself.

God called me, a reluctant communicator, to teach others to communicate. I felt like Moses: “God, send someone else!” I eventually became a professor of communication. Along the way, I learned how to practice what I was teaching.

I discovered that communication is essential in nearly all careers and certainly in every personal and professional relationship. I believe that God calls us to become effective communicators so we can serve him and one another in all areas of life.

In this opening chapter, I invite you personally to accept the call to communicate well, as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. We do not have to be perfect communicators. We seek steady progress, not perfection; we are pilgrim communicators assisted by the Holy Spirit. Communication is too important to take for granted. It is a gift from God that we can develop, enjoy, and use to serve others as we would like to be served. I call it servant communication.

**Communicating for Life**

Communication is not just a skill for a few people and a handful of careers. Nearly everything we do is communicative in nature, including making friends, interviewing for jobs, watching videos, and falling in love. Most importantly, communication equips us to grow relationally with God. We
are designed to communicate like fish are created to swim. As I explain later, human communication is how we create shared understanding (or shared meaning) to accomplish many things.

The Bible tells the story of communication between God and humankind. It describes both faithful people who listen to God and unfaithful people who ignore or defy God. It portrays both wise communicators who listen before speaking and foolish ones who speak before listening. Scripture shows us that we are made in the image and likeness of a God who spoke the world into existence, became the Word made flesh, and shared his word with us through Scripture.

When our communication sours, our lives become miserable; we face conflicts, loneliness, and sometimes despair. But when our communication is healthy, we enjoy friends, family, and coworkers. We also have greater self-confidence to live faithfully. We naturally enjoy communicating with God, others, and even ourselves. We experience real life.

To use a sports metaphor, communication is central to the game of life. Charging ahead in life without developing our communication abilities is like running onto a sports field without knowing how to play the game.

Communication is an essential skill for nearly every career. Organizations of all kinds seek employees who can listen carefully, speak well, write clearly, and interact cross-culturally. Employers seek people who can communicate with coworkers, customers, and clients. Media networks often employ skilled storytellers, not just technical producers.

The apostle Paul’s letters to churches highlight healthy communication. Early believers needed to learn how to encourage one another and solve disputes. They had to listen, teach, and testify in different settings. They had to learn what
Today, people use the word “rhetoric” negatively to refer to manipulative and self-serving communication. But the study of oral (vs. written) rhetoric began before the birth of Jesus Christ among ancient Greek and Roman orators (skilled public speakers, also called rhetors), who developed the art of rhetoric (public persuasion). Aristotle (384–322 BC), sometimes called the father of Western philosophy, classically defined rhetoric as “the possible means of persuasion in a given situation.”

Roman orator Cicero (106–43 BC) said that there are three major purposes for rhetoric—to inform, to persuade, and to delight. Most human communication, including media, falls into one or more of those rhetorical categories. Long before Jesus was born, then, rhetoric had become a scholarly field. Rhetoric, as communication, is one of the oldest academic disciplines.

By the twentieth century, scholars from many different academic disciplines had studied language and other forms of human communication, creating a field called communication studies. It includes both social-scientific research in psychology and sociology and insights from the humanities, including philosophy, literature, linguistics, and the arts. One of the most important contributions from the ancient rhetoricians was the recognition that communication is crucial for representative democracy, where leaders publicly debate and where courts consider justice.

The apostle Paul relied significantly on ancient rhetorical techniques to communicate truth. After studying their culture and communication, Paul addressed philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16–34). Saint Augustine (AD 354–430), who wrote the first major book on the art of rhetoric for Christians, said that Christians should be the most effective rhetoricians because they know the truth and are called by God to share it.

Moreover, the Greek word for “persuasion” (peitho) comes from the same root as the Latin word for “faith.” Aristotle’s term for rhetorical
Paul calls “being all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22). He was the first great communication strategist in the church, adapting the gospel message to various audiences (“all people”).

Today, much of our communication requires us to understand and serve people from different cultures. Because of worldwide transportation and communication technologies, learning how to adapt our messages to different audiences is critically important.

Celebrated media theorist Marshall McLuhan called the international communication system a “global village.” It is a catchy metaphor. But it makes more sense to describe our technologically interconnected world as something like a “global city,” filled with “neighborhoods” that speak different languages, believe different things, and often defend their cultures against outside media influence.

In addition, the globalization of media does not necessarily make it easier for us to understand those whom we hear about through news and see in entertainment. Greater messaging does not automatically produce deeper understanding. Communication scholar James W. Carey says that “modern technology actually makes communication much

“proof” is the related word *pistis*, which eventually meant the highest form of Christian knowledge.


more difficult. Rational agreement and democratic coherence become problematic when so little background is shared in common."

Moreover, we dwell largely in “secular” societies, and we learn to think and speak as secular people regardless of our faith. Missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin observes that those who are raised in the church actually grow up “bilingual.” He says we Christians “use the mother tongue of the Church on Sundays, but for the rest of our lives we use the language imposed by the occupying power” (the wider culture).

The field of communication studies is so vast that we can simply add the word “communication” to practically any...
human endeavor. More than likely, scholars have already been studying it. We can investigate mealtime communication, neighborhood communication, parenting communication, dating communication, friendship communication, coaching communication, and worship communication. In other words, learning how to communicate well applies to almost everything we do professionally and personally.

Communicating in Culture

How could one human ability—communication—become so essential to practically all we do? The simple answer is that God created us to relate to him and one another. We are social creatures designed to enjoy, love, and serve one another. We interact through communication.

The Religious Origins of Communication Theories

James W. Carey says that there are two basic theories (or views) of communication—cultural and transmission. A cultural view, which he ties historically to the Roman Catholic faith, emphasizes ritual; it looks at communication as participation in a meaningful ritual, whether having an everyday conversation or reading a news report. In other words, to understand communication we have to look at how we do it routinely, like a ritual. A transmission view, which he connects to Protestantism, emphasizes sending messages to influence others. Carey cites evangelism as an example. Both views can help us understand specific forms of communication, regardless of their apparent religious origins. a

A more complicated answer is that we are cultural creatures. We are not as driven by DNA as other creatures. Our creaturely instincts do not dictate how we communicate. Instead, we use communication to create dynamic *cultures*—entire ways of life. We also use communication to modify our cultures and to pass them along from generation to generation and place to place. A culture includes a people’s values, practices, and beliefs, along with all physical things like dwellings, clothing, and technologies. As a whole, human culture includes everything on earth that would not be here apart from human activity: from selfies and video streaming to worship music and fast food. Without communication, we could not create and share culture. With communication, we together can change what we believe and do in life. We all are called to create culture and to participate in sharing culture, such as by sharing our beliefs and values with our children.
As we communicate, we create, maintain, and change our ways of life. We work, play, and simply live together. In other words, our communication is always cultural. This is why learning another language includes learning another culture.

When God created the world, he called human beings to take care of it. The book of Genesis uses the language of agriculture—cultivating in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). We humans care for all kinds of culture, from movies to games and sports. As I write this, and as you read it, we together are cultivating a biblical understanding of communication. In our congregations, we cultivate a shared understanding of who we are as God’s people, using psalms, hymns, and other songs, as well as sermons and Bible studies.

In short, we are called to use communication to cultivate God-glorifying ways of life—and to thank God along the way both for the opportunity and for all positive results. Much of our everyday communication is pre-evangelistic—creating the kinds of Christlike relationships and cultures that attract nonbelievers. All of our communication can contribute to or detract from God’s kingdom on earth. Communication equips us to be agents of renewal in a broken world. Writer Andy Crouch says that we should “wake up every morning eager to create [culture].”

Learning Great Communication

As with all cultural activities, communication is learned. Although learning a first language comes naturally, excellent human communication requires dedication and effort. As Scripture shows, people have trouble listening to God and one another. Misunderstanding and deception are common.
Even Jesus’s disciples often misunderstood him (see, e.g., Luke 9:45; 24:25), and he certainly had communication skills beyond ours!

Each of us has communication strengths, and we can strive to improve in the communication categories where we are weak. For example, we can learn how to interpret and evaluate media stories. What are plays, movies, and television shows telling us about gender, romance, happiness, and vengeance? How do they support or challenge a biblical worldview? Such media discernment (often called media criticism) is crucial for a life of faith. Otherwise we implicitly learn to be like the broader culture rather than like faithful, holy Christians. Instead of just living in the world, we end up being merely of the world (John 17:11–18).

Similarly, we can practice listening, analyzing, discussing, and persuading. We can learn how to seek and offer forgiveness. We can learn how to share our faith, part of which
Accept the Call

includes knowing when it is appropriate to do so. We can learn how to use communication to grow our relationships with God, friends, family, faith communities, and coworkers.

We cannot become experts in all forms of communication, but we can become competent in many of them, especially as our careers change. Studies show that under half—and perhaps as few as 27 percent—of university students end up in careers directly related to their academic majors. Even so, nearly everyone ends up in a communication-related career because communication is so important in nearly all work.

Communicating Courageously

Superficial, routine communication is not so difficult. We all do it adequately most of the time. Someone asks us, “Would you please pass the salt?” We understand, and we pass the salt. That kind of simple transaction requires more courtesy than skill.

But a lot of communication requires courage, especially if we lack experience. Job interviews create anxiety for most of us. What about asking others out on a date, especially if we do not know them well? It took more courage than I had in the beginning of my adult life. I feared rejection.

After writing a book on TV evangelists, I started receiving requests for media interviews. I was doing so many of them that I was no longer paying close attention to who was interviewing me and who the audience was. I discovered halfway through one radio show that I was being interviewed by someone in the nation of New Zealand, not in the Michigan town of Zeeland only twenty miles from me. I still feel like
a fool when I recall the episode decades later. My answers were so tuned to an American audience that the program host finally asked me, “Dr. Schultze, do you know where New Zealand is?” I later discovered that the popular morning show was broadcast to millions across New Zealand. I feared doing more media interviews.

In college I gave a terrible presentation as part of a group project. I let my whole team down. For a while after that experience, I feared participating in any group presentations.

We can move ahead courageously even when our fears are deep. I had to work at getting over my fear of teaching by doing it one class session at a time. If we are fearful group leaders, we can still learn how to become better ones. That recognition alone can embolden us.

I am not naturally a good listener, partly because I fear that new information will challenge my existing assumptions. What if I learn something that shows I have been teaching and writing erroneously for years? It happens. I need courage to listen outside of my comfort zone.

Most of the communication situations that we think are crucially important and make us fearful are not so significant in the long run. Our future does not depend only on our personal communication, such as giving a great or mediocre speech. We can also find courage in the fact that most people want us to succeed and are generously forgiving and encouraging.

Examining Our Motives

The most life-changing truth about communication is deeply biblical. As Jesus puts it, our words flow from the desires of
our hearts (Matt. 12:34). Our motives, not just our messages, are critically important.

The sad truth is that we all have some selfish and even evil desires. We do not always use the gift of communication to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. We miss our true calling. As Augustine put it, we fail to offer love and compassion to those to whom it is due—namely, everyone, even our enemies.\textsuperscript{11}

We live in a time of deeply fractured communication. Many of us do not trust public communicators. Politics is filled with half-truths and personal attacks. Hollywood often
exploits rather than serves audiences. Some organizations do not acknowledge receipt of job applications, and a few do not even respond to candidates after giving them interviews.

It is one thing for us to be skilled communicators. It is far more for us to be respectful ones who treat others the way we would like to be treated. Jesus calls us to model skilled communication anchored in right motives.

We are God’s ears, eyes, and voices on earth. We are created to be caretakers of God’s Word and our own words, verbal and nonverbal, in person and through media. If we do so faithfully, loving God and our neighbors as ourselves, we become salt and light in a world broken by sin. Sometimes we will fail at even basic communication. But if we focus as much on our motives as our skills, we can still rest at night knowing we tried to love God and our neighbors as ourselves.

What Motivates Us?

One of the greatest rhetorical theorists of the twentieth century, Kenneth Burke, developed a “dramatist” theory of human communication that captures the importance of motive. He describes humans as actors on a stage. We Christians might say that we act on God’s stage. “Motive” describes why we do what we do—including why we communicate. What are we trying to accomplish when we communicate? What kind of outcome would we like? Sometimes our motives are obvious, such as trying to present ourselves positively in a job interview to get a position. Other times our motives are complicated, confusing, and even questionably good, such as why we are gossiping with friends. For Burke, human motive is entangled in “guilt” and “redemption.”

Conclusion

I had no idea what I was getting into when I realized that I was being called to study and practice communication. I was ill prepared. I felt like Moses; I wanted God to send somebody else. After all, I was starting from a disadvantaged background. I feared even trying to become a professional communicator. I felt guilty about not trusting God to keep my motives pure and to be with me when I would fall.

I identified with Abraham, who the writer of Hebrews says was faithful even though he did not know where he was going (Heb. 11:8). I too was lost, unsure where I was going. But I did desire to glorify God by communicating faithfully in Jesus’s name. So I accepted the call to communication. It has been a joy as well as a challenge. As the psalmist puts it, God establishes the work of our hands (Ps. 90:17)—and presumably our mouths and ears as well. I hope you will join me on the journey, accepting the call to become a servant communicator. You will bless others and be blessed in all areas of your life.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you define “servant communication”?
2. What does it mean to be called to communicate?
3. Why do many people use the word “rhetoric” negatively?
4. The apostle Paul says we should be “all things to all people” (1 Cor. 9:22). Should we really be “all things” to all audiences?

5. Do you agree with missionary-theologian Lesslie Newbigin that Christians grow up “bilingual”?