

TWO CONVERSATIONS THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

# LIFESIGNS<sup>®</sup>

HOW ARE YOU? REALLY.



CANDID CONVERSATION GUIDE  
AND COACHING PLAN

## A Candid Conversation Guide

*“Because you listened to me, I knew that you really loved me.”*  
- Jill Briscoe (Pete’s mom)

### **Eighteen seconds.**

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University studied thousands of recorded conversations between doctors and their patients. They found that, “on average, physicians interrupt patients within eighteen seconds of when they begin telling their story.”

It didn’t matter if the doctor was a general practitioner, an internist, a surgeon, or a gynecologist—they all consistently and chronically interrupted their patients at the beginning of a consultation. Why do most doctors, regardless of their stripe, interrupt patients so quickly? My physician friends assure me that interrupting is not part of the standard curricula at med schools, along with gross anatomy. Yet they do tend to interrupt us, don’t they?

I don’t think it’s because doctors are distracted. After all, they’re only focused on listening to one patient at a time. Yes, they’re often in a hurry, caring for dozens of patients in a single day—but eighteen seconds?

My theory about this annoying phenomenon is simple: doctors are diagnosticians. It’s their job to find and fix a problem. In their defense, a thorough and accurate medical diagnosis demands rigorous inquiry. With your life and health on the line, they’d better ask lots of questions!

Here’s the point: When it comes to a LifeSigns conversation, you’re not the doctor. Jesus is. You’re not supposed to “fix” anybody. Jesus does the fixing, and that is tremendously freeing.

### **Candid Conversation Killers**

A LifeSigns conversation is a two-way street. When the other person has the floor, you need to avoid three conversation killers at all costs: interrupting, judging, and offering unsolicited advice. Don’t believe me? Try any of those with a spouse or friend, and then see what happens.

That’s why a candid conversation—and especially a LifeSigns conversation—requires a different approach. When the other person is talking, your only job is to “Listen, Love, and Point.” You can’t fix someone—only Jesus can. But you can listen to them, love them, and point them to Christ and to biblical truth.

Our little mantra to “Listen, Love, and Point” is easy to remember, but can be vexingly difficult to practice. So let’s spend a minute on each.

**Making it Safe #1: Listen**

I don't know if Pete Briscoe, our senior pastor, took advanced listening classes in seminary, or if his wife has whipped him into shape, but I can tell you this: He is one of the best listeners I've ever met. Even though he's incredibly busy, when we do talk, I feel that he's 100% focused on our conversation.

Can you guess his big listening secret? It's because he loves me. I know that Pete deeply and genuinely cares about my life, and good listening is simply a natural reflection of his heart.

That's why in order to listen well, you must love well.

Good listening also requires patience. In dozens of candid conversations over the years, I've found that people tend to reveal themselves slowly, in layers, holding back deeply buried issues until they know it's truly safe. The more painful or sensitive an issue, the more patience that's required. If you jump-in with some brilliant advice or begin to relate parts of your own story, the door of dialogue will likely slam shut. Proverbs frequently reminds us that, "The wise listen and add to their learning" (Proverbs 1:5), and to "listen, my son, and be wise" (Proverbs 23:19).

"No problem," you say, "I'm a great listener."

Are you sure? Can I shoot straight with you? Bad listening is like bad breath. Other people usually won't say anything about it; they'll just keep a safe distance.

When I turned 19, after some exposure to my poor listening skills, a college friend wrote on the back of my birthday card, "Sometimes, Scott, I cannot imagine Jesus talking the way you talk." I was shocked. I was a little offended. But I eventually realized that he was absolutely right. As my mouth ran non-stop, I ran right over people. I am forever grateful for my friend's candor about a blind spot. So, if you suspect listening is not your strong suit, this is a great opportunity for personal growth.

Here's something that might prove helpful: If you're listening during a LifeSigns conversation, and you're just dying to interject a pearl of wisdom—pray it, don't say it. Turn your commentary heavenward, keep your ears open, and watch as God quiets your heart.

Good listening also requires that you exercise discernment. A gentle and well-timed question can help someone dig a little deeper, and open the door a little wider. But you cannot force it open. Don't even try.

Good listening will also cost you something. In my experience, listening with your whole heart requires intense, focused effort. But when, by the power of the Spirit, you genuinely care about the person sitting across from you, it can sometimes be effortless. An excellent resource on how to have safe, productive conversations is called the "Speaker/Listener Technique," and is found in *Fighting for Your Marriage* by Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg.

**Making it Safe #2: Love**

Sharing your inner life can be a scary proposition, even if you know someone pretty well beforehand. And as we've said before, when you're facing struggles, the urge to hide can be almost overpowering. That's why candid conversations require a massive dose of love and grace.

I can't say it any better than John: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:18-19).

Think about it. Nothing breaks the icy grip of fear and shame more quickly than a friend who looks you in the eye and says, "I just want you to know, I love you. I care deeply about you. And absolutely nothing you say, nothing you reveal today will change that."

Everybody's favorite passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 reads like a "how-to manual" for candid conversations: "Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

When you express Christ's love in a LifeSigns conversation, you will be patient with the other person. You will be kind. You'll protect people's privacy and honor them with your undivided attention. You'll even persevere when they start to ramble. Through it all, the person sitting across from you will experience the tangible love of God—and be transformed in the process. You're just along for the ride. How cool is that?

**Making it Safe #3: Point**

Genuinely listening and loving are essential elements in making a candid conversation safe. When someone feels fully heard—and when they give you permission—you can also help point them in the right direction. God can speak directly through you, because "the tongue of the wise brings healing" (Proverbs 12:18).

First, you can point them to the truth. Each of the Conversation Starters in this book includes carefully selected and relevant scripture. The idea is to allow God's voice to enter into your LifeSigns conversation. You can simply say, "Thanks for sharing your heart with me. Let's see what the Bible says about this...", then turn to the scriptures together.

Second, you can point people to Christ. In Galatians we're told to "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). That means you carry people with heavy burdens to Christ. He is the Great Physician, the Counselor, the one and only Savior. He is the "burden lifter," not you.

"Makes sense," you say, "but how does that work?"

I've sat on the curb of a friend's house at midnight, carefully listening to the aftermath of a horrible marriage meltdown, and literally said: "I love you man. What a mess...I'm sorry I can't fix this for you. My biggest job right now is to point you to Jesus. He'll know what to do. Come on buddy, let's pray..." It's like you're leading someone by the hand up the steps "to the throne of grace, so that they may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Third, you can point people to others who can help. Obviously, if you sense someone is a danger to themselves or others, or if a child is in danger, you've got to call for help. Day or night, you must make that call. You can dial 911, and then call the Bent Tree office at 972-306-4477 to leave a message for a pastor.

For most everything else, the individual LifeSigns Growth Plan generated after you take your LifeSigns on-line is brimming with dozens of excellent, proven resources.

As we've said before, LifeSigns is not just about analysis, it's about action. As you wrap-up your candid conversation, make specific commitments and hold each other accountable in the days and weeks to come. You may even decide to put a candid conversation on your weekly schedule.

### **What About Marriage Issues?**

A word of warning: Conversations about marriage can be a minefield. It's never more important to "Listen, Love, and Point" than in a candid conversation about marriage issues. A few additional guidelines may be helpful, especially if you're a small group leader.

#### **Scenario #1: One-on-one Conversations about Marriage**

Please remember there are two sides to every story. If a husband in your group confides in you that, in spite of \_\_\_\_, she's still \_\_\_\_, you may develop some strong opinions about this couple, and the wife in particular. But with further conversation, you may discover that, the husband is doing \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_. This new information can throw the whole situation into a different light. Nowhere are blind spots more prevalent and confounding than in a marital relationship. A trained counselor or Bent Tree pastor is often the best person to sort through the thorny tangle of interwoven marriage issues. So when necessary, lovingly point them in that direction, offering to go with them, if you think it would help.

#### **Scenario #2: Group Conversations about Marriage**

If you're discussing the Marriage section of LifeSigns in a mixed small group, we strongly recommend that you split up into separate groups of men and women. Why? In our experience it's much easier and safer to discuss these issues in a same-sex group—without your spouse glaring at you from across the room. Trust me, I speak from personal experience on this one.

Once you're in your same-sex groups, don't be surprised if you hear wild laughter coming from the ladies' side of the house. The guys will likely finish first and start talking about sports or power tools or whatever—all the while wondering what's so darn funny over there. For some reason, that's just how this usually works.

Once you've had separate discussions as men and women, come back together and share your insights. If you're the group leader, lay down some ground rules and keep a firm hand on the conversation. Encourage people to share general insights, not highly personal issues with the full group. When you take this approach, people will feel safe and you'll have a rich discussion.

One more thing: If you see puffy eyes and Kleenex, be ready to follow-up with a side conversation.

### **What's in the personal Growth Plan?**

Each LifeSigns module is designed to get you thinking and talking about critical areas of life. These sections are not intended to be a comprehensive discussion of all the issues related to, for example, marriage or money. Instead we're using a combination of scriptures and recommended resources to spark candid conversations about your personal situation.

Now, with a humble heart, armed with biblical truth, and in the ever-present love and grace of your heavenly Father, go forth and boldly share what's in your heart. Take a few risks and become known to someone. Don't forget to Listen, Love, and Point. Then watch as God does something new and wonderful in your life.