**5 Ground Rules for Candid Conversations** by Tom Berlin  Leading Ideas

**Tom Berlin says that candid conversation takes courage. But it also requires kindness and compassion. He suggests five practices for approaching difficult conversations with openness, honesty, sensitivity, and grace.**

There are few places where courage is more required than in the words we say to each other. Jesus demonstrates how the courage of candid dialogue enables us to create deeper relationships, change a person’s view, alter the climate of a room, and encourage people around us. Such was the case when he dined in the home of Simon the Pharisee and the woman with an alabaster jar anointed his feet with costly ointment. Simon deemed the woman a sinner. But Jesus engaged Simon in conversation, inviting him to see the woman and her actions differently (Luke 7:36-50).

Jesus has no fears that limit his conversations with people. This is how he offers them the opportunity to grow in their love for God, neighbor, and themselves. Courage and candor are required elements of such discussions.

Candor requires courage because it often must name uncomfortable facts and dynamics that people want to avoid. But candor is not ugliness. It does not name uncomfortable things in an uncomfortable fashion. When Christians are candid, they are rooted in the love of Christ that links them to kindness and compassion.

**1. Begin with courtesy.**

We live in a time when if one finds a way to say whatever is on his or her mind, it is often seen as an act of courage. Jesus shows us a better way that enables us to love our neighbor with integrity. The biggest part of candor is the willingness to knock on the door and begin a conversation. Rather than starting with an accusation or judgment or launching into the issue at hand, start with a relational bid. Invite the other person into conversation. By entering the conversation with permission of both parties, the conversation slows down, where everyone can do their best thinking. Starting well sets the tone of the entire conversation.

**2. Find a place of agreement.**

When we find points of agreement with people with whom we disagree, we stand in a common space as equals and partners rather than adversaries hoping to win a fight by a higher tally of most correct points scored. It takes courage to do this, because it means that our mind might change in the process. The candor that Jesus models is one that seeks to increase understanding and change perceptions through dialogue that is rooted in respect.

**3. Focus on the issue.**

Conversation breaks down when we divert to accounts of the past rather than remaining in the present. Rather than stay in the moment to resolve what is right before us, we bring up past hurts, unresolved conflicts, or observations about how one person or another is “always” this way or that. A litany of bygone events, sometimes years or decades in the past, may not even be relevant to the topic at hand; but if anxiety is high, it is easier to divert the conversation to issues and incidents that we have not reconciled or forgiven than deal with what is before us. It takes courage to do the work found in important conversations and not derail them.

**4. Give people room.**

Rather than being accusatory, candid conversations maintain the element of curiosity. They employ better questions. They invite participants to step back and examine what is taking place and consider the motivations that are at work in the lives of those involved. The dialogue enables us to consider both what each person has done and the steps each might take in the future to strengthen the relationship or to repair harm that has been done.

**5. Conclude with a blessing.**

No matter how a conversation goes, it is helpful to conclude it with some type of blessing. Even in the worst scenarios, where a relationship is ending, it can be very helpful to simply wish a person well as they go. I have found that if someone has told me of their adamant disagreement with some view that I have expressed, if the conversation was tense or left me frustrated, it is always helpful to take a deep breath and express what I appreciate about the other person. If we end conversations abruptly, with ramped up feelings of anger or frustration, and then walk away, fear will creep back in and make it very difficult to pick that conversation up again in the future. If you find a way to conclude the conversation with a blessing, you give the Holy Spirit room to work in both your lives and open the door to the next conversation.

Many people are unfamiliar with functional ways of dealing with the complexities of life. Courage keeps us focused. It does not allow personal insecurity to divert us from the hard but necessary work of this restorative practice. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus shows little concern about how others view him. He had little interest in drama for drama’s sake. He helped people move beyond drama to a candid look at their reality, so that they could choose to be made new and whole. When he teaches, leads, and does the work of his mission, he does not take polls to chart his approval rating. His focus is to do the work of functional relationships. Jesus has no fears that limit his conversations with people. This is how he offers them the opportunity to grow in their love for God, neighbor, and themselves. Courage and candor are required elements of such discussions.

This article is condensed from *Courage: Jesus and the Call to Brave Faith* (Used by permission, ©Abingdon Press, 2021) by Tom Berlin.