

# Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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## The Art of Listening

Paul Tillich, German born philosopher and theologian, once said: "The first duty of love is to listen." No single characteristic of a person reveals as much about themselves as their ability to pay attention to others. While we are all born with the capacity to hear, the ability to listen must be deliberately cultivated. How odd that this skill so central to loving, to community, to healthy relationships is so seldom taught in our churches.

**"The first  
duty of  
love is to  
listen."  
—Paul Tillich**

People pay hundreds of dollars an hour for someone to listen to them. Therapists would likely be out of a job if more people knew how to listen, and put those skills to use. How do you feel when someone really listens to you? Most likely you feel validated...rather important...perhaps wise...maybe even loved?

There is a particular kind of listening which can be taught to the people in your church that will greatly enhance the communication between members, and in your members' personal lives. It is called "active listening." It is a conscious effort to not only hear the words of the other person, but to consciously understand the complete message being sent.

Here are a few tips on how to be an active listener...

- Pay attention.*
  - Look at the speaker directly, but don't stare.
  - Avoid preparing a response before the speaker is finished.
  - Mentally block out

distracting noises, things, and other people.

-Listen to the speaker's body language.

-Avoid side conversations in a group setting.

•*Show that you are listening.*

-Nod occasionally.

-Smile and use other facial expressions.

-Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.

-Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like "yes", and "uh huh". Lastly,

•*Provide feedback.*

-Paraphrase. "So, you're saying that" is great way to complement the speaker and clarify the meaning.

-Question. "What do you mean when you say..." or "Is this what you mean?"

**Check out Dr. McIntosh's  
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# The love of God begins by listening to his word.

## Sermon topic: How to be a better lover.

- Summarize. “It was good talking with you about...”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer underscores the importance of love in the church: “The first service one owes to others in the fellowship consists of listening to them. Just as love of God begins in listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word, but lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him.”

### Ideas You Can Use

If you believe one of the church's important roles is to teach members how to love, then it's not so far-fetched to be teaching them about a key part of loving-listening.

Learn about active listening. Google “active listening” and you'll get nearly two million hits. Add “Christian” to the search and it's still nearly 200,000. There are lots of excellent books and resources on the topic.

Why not offer a class on “active listening”? You will obviously want to approach the topic from a Christian perspective, and help class members apply the concepts in their own lives. An eight-week adult class on how to be a good listener would have many people sign up.

A series of sermons on “How to be a Better Lover” would certainly get people's attention. One of those weeks could be dedicated to attentive listening. James 1:19 is a good Scripture reference: “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” The topic easily lends

itself to a creative drama presentation. The service could include audience participation on listening. Prepare a quiz. Have a panel discussion. Use the entire service as a creative opportunity to learn together. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* records the verse in James this way: “Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.”

Suggest that your small group leaders study a book by a Christian author on listening or communication. Talk with your youth leader about a group study on listening. What parent wouldn't support that?! Why, they'd probably buy the materials for you!

### Questions to ask and answer this week.

How good of a listener are you?

What listening skills do you need to put into practice?

How might you begin to train church leaders to be better listeners?



Adapted from *What Every Pastor Should Know* (Baker Books 2013) by Gary L. McIntosh and Charles Arn.

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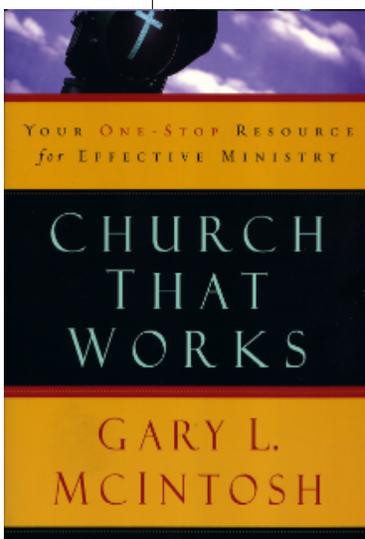
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