

Tongue-Tied

*Learning the **LOST ART**
of Talking about Faith*



STUDY GUIDE

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This study guide can be divided into a thirteen-week study to last a quarter of the year, or can be handled however your group normally works or chooses to engage in reading and then discussing books. And don't feel obligated to use all the questions! Pick and choose what would work best with your group.

PART 1

LOSING FLUENCY

Why Is It So Hard for Many of Us to Talk about Our Christian Faith?

Introductory exercise: Start with a gut check with no embarrassment: Is it hard for you to talk about your faith? In what settings is it difficult? Are there settings where it is easier? What have been your experiences in “witnessing” or sharing faith in the past?

Leader note: If you feel there will be reluctance or less-than-open responses, consider making this an opportunity for participants to write down their responses on a half sheet of paper, rather than voicing them in a group. Have them submit their responses, and then, drawing randomly, read them aloud to the group and discuss. Some group members may end up identifying themselves as the writer of a response.

To conclude this introduction, remind participants that the goal is not to make anyone feel guilty or superior or like a failure in talking about personal faith, or to avoid splintering your faith circle. Lead in prayer or invite participants to join in a circle prayer.

INTRODUCTION + CHAPTER 1: DISILLUSIONED WITH INHERITED FAITH

1. To whom is the book primarily directed? Where would you peg those in your group or church—progressive and educated professionals? Religious conservative and evangelical? Or do you not like the thought of doing so, and why?
2. Did you find the introduction discouraging? Do you agree with Sara Wenger Shenk’s overall analysis? Why or how?
3. Do you have any tips or ideas for praying with the “genuine affection” for God that Shenk mentions (p. 19)?
4. Would you call yourself a cradle Christian? Explain.
5. On page 22, Shenk quotes from Isaiah 11:9: “For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” Do you think that prophecy has been fulfilled? Why and how, or why not?
6. On page 36, Shenk cites what higher education has done to faith, at least for some: “What higher education in large part neglected to do well was to model faith attuned to the Spirit of God—an active, alert faith equipped to critically discern what is of God and what is not. [. . . And it failed to] equip us to become outspoken people of faith.” Do you think that is true for you? For your faith community? Why or why not?
7. Do you expect that God will intervene in your affairs? What would it look like for God to act?
8. Shenk quotes Richard Kauffman, former editor of the *Christian Century*, who reminds us, “Our faith is based on a narrative, and we have to be able to tell that story” (p. 44). Are you able? Share stories.

CHAPTER 2: SUPERFICIAL AND CONTRIVED CHRISTIANESE

1. Have you ever found yourself singing hymns or gospel songs that you no longer love? Or found that the language no longer matches your theology? Or are you not inclined to take offense at older words? Describe why or why not.
2. Shenk dedicates her book to her husband of over forty-five years, Gerald Shenk, “whose lighthearted talk about faith feels like the most natural thing in the world.” Does this bring to mind anyone you know (or yourself?) who finds talking about faith completely natural?
3. On page 49, Shenk refers to the dominant white culture. What is the dominant racial or ethnic culture where you live or attend church?
4. Also on pages 49–50, Shenk writes about what some call “Disney Princess theology” among white Christians: “Given that many of us tend to read the Bible for what it says to us as individuals, rather than focusing on God’s vision for the good of all people, each of us sees ourselves as ‘the princess in every story’ [quoting pastor and blogger Erna Kim Hackett]. We are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. We are Peter, but never Judas.” What do you think about this idea? Is this something you have experienced in your own approach to faith? In any faith communities or churches of which you have been a part?
5. Shenk frequently combines poetic language with her thoughts, such as on page 57: “We can forage for words to describe moments when we gape speechless in wonder, weep uncontrollably with relief, or are utterly undone by joy.” Does this bring to mind any experiences, stories, testimonies?

CHAPTER 3: MANUFACTURING FAKE CASTLES OF CERTAINTY

1. Do you find it difficult or uncomfortable to have questions that don’t seem to have answers? How do you handle such questions?
2. How did you feel about Shenk’s statement on page 60: “Faith is about learning to trust God even when we can’t see or know for certain. Faith is making peace with the mystery of unknowing”?
3. Has your faith and trust changed over the years?
4. Shenk quotes well-known Franciscan Richard Rohr: “How strange that the very word ‘faith’ has come to mean its exact opposite” (p. 61). How do you interpret or understand what he is saying? Do you agree, disagree, or have your own perspective to add?
5. In what other areas of life do you need to trust or believe something that you cannot prove or show? Discuss.
6. On page 60, Shenk writes: “A common reaction to increasing uncertainty is a rise of fundamentalist and extremist groups. The desperate need many feel for certainty and absolutes has become a near pathological obsession—putting at risk our ability to talk in thoughtful ways about faith.” Share any experiences you’ve had where this seemed to be true. How have you responded in such conversations or to those with such understandings?

CHAPTER 4: UNCOMFORTABLE IN OUR OWN SKIN

1. What does “being made in the image of God” mean to you? Discuss. Don’t worry about “right” answers; just talk about what it means for you.
2. Shenk does not skirt around issues of sexual orientation that came to the surface in her own family. Discuss your thoughts and processing regarding sexual orientation. Has your congregation or group reached a “peaceable kingdom” in your community on this or related issues?
3. Do you often find yourself using us-versus-them language, thoughts, or positions in regard to theology and practice in the church? What happens when you do so?

CHAPTER 5: US-VERSUS-THEM DEFAULT THINKING

1. Shenk reminds us that Jesus was not condemned by atheists or agnostics. “He was condemned by religious leaders who whipped their followers into a frenzy, goading them to believe their tribe’s faith was under siege” (p. 82). Where do you see this happening in your own context? Or is this not the case for your context?
2. Did you grow up thinking your faith group was more right than others? What influenced you most regarding faith?
3. How can we avoid what Shenk describes as an “arrogant sense of exclusive rightness” (p. 87)? What concrete stories or examples come to mind?
4. Shenk quotes sociologist Christian Smith, who writes that membership numbers that swell “may have nothing at all to do with spiritual vitality or faithfulness or truth” . . . but may be because “Christian groups ‘benefit’ from conflict, disunity, and fragmentation and use such disagreement and distinction from others to build and sustain their in-group strength.” Do you think that is true in your community? In other groups you have observed? Try to discuss this point without using “they” in your discussion (which will most likely be hard to do!).

CHAPTER 6: COMMUNITY-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING IS VANISHING

1. The beginning of chapter 6 is powerfully convicting, saying that perhaps we’ve lost the ability to talk about faith because “we have little opportunity to experience the heartfelt expression of parental or congregational faith or to hear and practice faith language that convincingly names our experience” (p. 93). When you were growing up, was there “testimony time” or faith sharing during worship services or prayer meetings/small group sharing? What are the drawbacks or positive learnings from such times?
2. If you experienced such expressions of faith language growing up, did these stories and personal experiences shape your faith? Why or why not?
3. Did you talk about faith in your home—whether as a child or an adult?
4. How have you worked at making prayer time meaningful for children or grandchildren—or or yourself?
5. On page 96, Shenk writes, “We can ponder what it is we love most, what it is that makes life good—and why. Reflecting together on these questions is essentially a theological conversation, particularly if we touch on God in any way. Yet many of us don’t choose to talk about these questions with friends—or with our children.” Why, Shenk asks, is that?
6. Who are the wise sages in your life?

PART 2

LEARNING FLUENCY—STEP BY STEP

How Can We Discover Freedom, Honesty, and Resolve When Talking about Faith?

CHAPTER 7: THE POWER OF SACRED WORDS REDISCOVERED

1. What do you like about the idea of reviving sacred language in ordinary conversation?
2. How can we bring fresh interpretation to our language about faith? Shenk notes Jonathan Merritt's proposal that we "muster the courage and imagination to play with sacred words, since words are malleable, open for fresh interpretations" (p. 120).
3. The author points out that we share the bond of humanity with every single person around the world. How does that inspire you to be more open to have conversations with others about the meaning of life?
4. How can we revisit the biblical truths, as in Ezekiel, where, as Shenk writes, "the rejuvenating river flows not from the king's palace but from a worshiping community who knows God's Word and glorifies God as the source of peace and freedom" (p. 123)?
5. How can we be re-emboldened by the Word of God? Share brainstorming ideas. Or revisit pages 124–32 for key concepts.

CHAPTER 8: COMING HOME TO BODY AND VOICE

1. Biblical scholar Tom Neufeld supplies the thought behind this idea that Shenk shares on page 134: "That people long alienated from one another [Jews and Gentiles], oppressed because of their race or gender, formerly victims of violence or prone to use violence *could be a new people together* was a source of great wonderment in the early church." How does this truth give you hope?
2. Where and how can you work toward that goal of unity with other humans, also expressed by Jesus in his last days on earth (see John 17)?
3. There are many examples of disunity that Christians need to work on. Pastor and ministry founder Roma Benjamin states questions along these lines: "Who gave us this language—white church? Black church? Hispanic church? Chinese church? Who segregated us this way? How many Gods do we serve? God of the white church? Of the Black church? Of the Chinese church?" (p. 143).
Benjamin continues, "Jesus said, 'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.' It's heartbreaking to see the lack of biblical response from white evangelical Christianity." How and why did these disparities come to be? How do you respond from where you sit?
4. Do you have examples to share of cultivating conversation across divides? (See p. 144).

CHAPTER 9: FORTIFYING WORDS NEEDED IN HARD TIMES

1. When have you been awakened to your mortality and the need for other humans and God in your life? Share stories.
2. Shenk writes of how music lifted her from the sorrow of losing two friends in the same brief time period. Have you ever been similarly touched and elevated by the Holy Spirit?
3. Shenk cautions about clichéd responses to calamity, such as grief making us stronger or wiser. That may be true, but it is not often helpful for others to hear. Why and how does sorrow speak to us?
4. A season of loss and marginalization can have the impact of restoring the church, theologian Elaine Heath has written (see p. 148). How are we moved by dark nights of the soul?
5. If you are one who finds engaging in faith conversations easier than some, what tips would you offer those whose tongue is somewhat tied?

CHAPTER 10: WISDOM RAISING HER VOICE

1. Shenk asks, “Why . . . does story after story in the Bible of an encounter with God or a messenger from God include the response ‘Fear not’ or ‘Be not afraid?’” (p. 159). What do you think?
2. How do you feel about Scriptures that talk about fear? What do you think about the idea that “the fear of the Lord is all about knowing where *real power* lies” (p. 158)?
3. On page 163, Shenk says that when she prays the words “Let it be” on mornings when she feels especially anxious, “there is for me an intentional letting go of worry,” and she certainly finds God’s moving in her spirit. Has this happened to you—when a specific prayer or thought seemed to be answered for you? Share stories if you feel so led.
4. Do you see wisdom and humility interplaying in your life?
5. Shenk expands on Walter Brueggemann’s thought: “Somehow in comprehending that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and that as human beings we don’t know a whole lot about how things really work, there must be latitude for review of old answers, testing of new solutions” (p. 161). What are your thoughts on this?
6. How would you like to let the wisdom of the refrain “Let it be . . .” lead you through anxious days?

CHAPTER 11: CURIOSITY GERMINATES FAITH TALK

1. Shenk states on page 173, “I am more wired to curiosity and playfulness when it comes to God-talk, a playfulness that knows all about reverence and holy hilarity.” Have you discovered similar wiring in your spirit? What happens?
2. How does the idea sit with you of letting “curiosity about anything and everything” (p. 173) take over when religious or political differences loom in conversations?
3. Shenk also notes that the last thing any Christian wants is to sound boring in conversation. “Contrary to what most of us think, theology, or talk about faith, is rooted primarily in curiosity—a desire to know more about God and about everything that swirls around our daily universe of moments. As we listen to what we notice, we may ask, Where is God?” (p. 176). Where do you find God in your daily life?
4. How have you seen God’s love revealed in the world?
5. If you were God, what would you want to tell us about God-talk?
6. Do you believe humans are participants in a “reality larger than ourselves” (p. 172)?

CHAPTER 12: THE VERVE OF SCRIPTURE EMANCIPATED

1. What do you think of the statement, “As communities of faith, it is urgent that we jettison the literalist, fundamentalist views of the Bible. These deceptive notions about the Bible as a righteous harangue, straightjacket, and dictator of dogma are like deadweights on a drowning person” (p. 182). Do you agree? How do we abandon long-held literalist views of the Bible? Any cautions?
2. How have you worked at helping children see how individual stories—even difficult or scary ones—relate to the Bible’s overarching theme of love?
3. Have you met or known anyone who has been newly struck by the life of Jesus and the love Christ brought to the world? How did that person’s experience speak to you?
4. On page 191, Shenk pits the incongruities of Scripture and the biblical story side by side. Have persons in your study group take turns reading them aloud. How do you work at holding these truths together in your own mind and heart?
5. How do you handle cross-religious conversations? If you have been caught in arguments in the past, do you have new ideas for how to enter in to such conversations with more grace or love?

CHAPTER 13: TALKING SIN, REPENTANCE, CONVERSION, SALVATION

1. Let’s borrow the great question from Shenk’s grandson: If you could have a superpower, what would you choose?
2. Alternatively, what great probing questions have you heard from your children or grandchildren or in the classroom? Discuss.
3. Shenk points out, “The reality of evil shows up in a personal crisis or community-wide traumatic event. . . . Teaching [our children and grandchildren] how to anchor their lives in the love of God amid all manner of vulnerabilities will be the greatest gift we can ever give them” (p. 198). How have you seen or experienced this truth?
4. What evils or sins are you prone to? Ponder these privately and share with the group as you feel led.
5. Musing on our faults and sins unties our tongues as we deal with the impact of faith in our lives. Shenk points out, “Learning to talk about faith must involve uncovering where evil is hiding in plain sight” (p. 202). Do you have examples or insights to share?

CHAPTER 14: BEAUTY’S VOICE SAVES THE WORLD

1. In this chapter, enjoy reflections on various forms of beauty and how they transform not only the world, but us. How has beauty changed your mood, or an outcome, or your life?
2. Have you ever thought of how experiencing something beautiful can be sacred? Reflect quietly on the content discussed on page 212, then share. Or just savor!
3. Ponder how the very symbol from Christ’s death on a tortuously cruel cross was transformed into the widely recognized Christian symbol (jewelry even!), reminding us of God’s love and peace everlasting. What are your thoughts and reflections?
4. How does beauty speak to you? What forms do you most appreciate?
5. Spend some time considering what you or someone in your group has experienced that warrants a standing ovation and applause for God’s goodness and love. Then let it rip! (What a great idea!)

CHAPTER 15: EARTH'S SPLENDOR AND SUFFERING PROCLAIM FAITH

1. In this chapter, Shenk argues that faith talk shouldn't be mostly about personal salvation for some sweet by-and-by. It should be about how we seek shalom for all God's creation. Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
2. What about the natural world do you find most astonishing or amazing?
3. Shenk writes, "When humans become greedy, selfish, or violent, we lose touch with how dependent we are on the generous gifts of the land—and ultimately, on God. Mistreatment of the land is directly related to mistreatment of other persons and alienation from God" (p. 225). What have you observed or experienced along these lines?
4. We read the words of botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Potawatomi tribe: "Names are the way we humans build relationship, not only with each other but with the living world. I'm trying to imagine what it would be like going through life not knowing the names of the plants and animals around you" (p. 227). Plan or go on a nature walk around the property where you meet, and enjoy whatever nature and wildlife you are lucky enough to observe.
5. In many contexts, Christians have emphasized the "dominion over the earth" that Genesis 1:26 speaks of, while the original Hebrew, according to this book and biblical scholars, has "connotations of shepherding, kinship, and communal power" (p. 228). How do the additional associations Shenk mentions change or enlarge your reflections on the created world? What changes in your own life and practice do you feel led to make?
6. Throughout the book, the author points out that being able to discuss science and the divine together will aid our talking with others about faith. Do you agree? What examples come to mind?

CHAPTER 16: SCIENCE AND FAITH SING IN HARMONY

1. In your experience and upbringing, were science and faith "intimately related," as Shenk writes, or were they competitors to be argued about?
2. How have you worked at honing your listening skills on these topics?
3. Are you astonished by and supportive of new scientific discoveries, or are you hesitant?
4. Consider and respond to Shenk's question, "Why are we not endlessly intrigued to ask theological questions about why everything came to be in the first place?" (p. 235).
5. Discuss how our curiosity can lead to greater understanding of how the universe works, and also greater awe of the Creator. What are your ideas and examples?
6. Are you curious or satisfied that we don't know exactly how, when, and where God came into being? Discuss.

CHAPTER 17: WORSHIP AND PRAYER UNLEASH TONGUES

1. How have you forsaken the God you follow? What would the prophet Jeremiah say or write to the church today?
2. What do you think of Shenk's comparison on page 250 that our lives need focused and meaningful daily worship and prayer—just as we need water and food?
3. Have you had the experience of participating in an act of worship that was new or strange or awkward for you—such as joining a conga line at a gathering (p. 253)? Share about the experience.
4. This chapter reminds us that as we incorporate what we've discovered and learned or been reminded of throughout this book, "we will discover how honest worship and prayer frees us to speak vulnerably with our children, colleagues, and friends about what it means to trust God and joyfully walk in the way of Jesus" (p. 264). What has been a wake-up call for you? What will you carry with you in the days, months, and years ahead? How can you live with the new insights and callings?

CONCLUSION

Leader note: Use these additional questions at the end of the study or anytime you need more or want different questions to discuss.

1. One reviewer has suggested that "this book is best read slowly with days, or possibly weeks, passing between reading the chapters. Learning and expanding our language for Christian faith takes time." Looking back over your study of *Tongue-Tied* (and the Bible), what has been your greatest learning?
2. As a result of this study, what do you sense God may be saying to God's people all around the world at this particular time in history?
3. How do you think God receives "foxhole" or "exam time" prayers? What has been your experience in difficult situations?
4. What is one baby step you wish to take in becoming more conversant about faith?
5. *Exercise:* Do an end-of-study survey similar to the one you conducted at the beginning of the book study to share learnings and participants' outstanding takeaways. Even if participants didn't write down their experiences, have them write down their ideas of how they (or your group) might want to put their new thoughts and goals into action.