

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Communication*

D. R. G. OWEN

IT might well be argued that communication is the central task of the Church in the world. *What* the Church has to communicate is, of course, the "grace and truth [that] came by Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:17). *How* we are to discharge this task in the modern world is not so clear. Various methods and means of communication have always existed, but powerful new media have made their appearance in our time. It is partly because of these inventions, with their great potentialities for good and evil, that considerable attention has recently been concentrated on researches and investigations into the nature of communication itself. The Church, because of its central task, must be ready and willing to make the best possible use of these developments.

One of the points on which there seems to be agreement among all those who are wrestling with this problem is that merely verbal communication is certainly not the only, and perhaps not the most effective method. Our attempts at communication in the Church have been vitiated in the past by excessive reliance on words, both spoken and printed, as though these were obviously the best, or even the only, means of teaching and imparting the truths of our faith. We may call this the error of verbalism. The onslaughts of television, to which most of us are now exposed, tell us in no uncertain terms that the picture is often a more effective vehicle of communication than the word. This lesson is well known also to the writers of advertisements and comic strips and to the editors of picture magazines. There are even some who believe that the pictograph will someday replace the printed word as the normal means of communication. Further, in the field of education, it is now widely held that human beings learn more, and retain what they learn longer, when they participate as a group in some activity, than when they are the passive and individual recipients of information and ideas conveyed in words alone. In the Church we have lagged behind these developments, and it seems safe to conclude that our failure effectively to transmit the Christian faith to our people and to the world is due, in part at least, to the mistake of verbalism, to our exclusive use of words in preaching, teaching and in conveying ideas.

This mistake is based, among other things, on a misunderstanding of the nature of Christian truth and on a misinterpretation of the way in which God communicates with man. God's self-communication has two aims, the revelation of his nature and the redemption of our nature. These two aims, to reveal and to redeem, come together and are both alike accomplished in the act. Usually the same divine act achieves both purposes, as in the de-

*This article is based on Convocation addresses delivered at Wycliffe College, Toronto, and Huron College, London in the Spring of 1956.

liverance of the Israelites from Egypt and above all in the deliverance of man through the Cross. In these acts, God reveals himself and saves his people. His truth and his grace are jointly communicated in the act. Christian truth, which is at the same time saving truth, is therefore not verbal but dramatic.

Our preoccupation with verbalism has led us astray especially in our understanding of the nature of revelation, so that it is commonly supposed that God has revealed himself in words, in the words of the Bible or the formulae of the creeds or the doctrines of theology. This misunderstanding is fostered by the fact that the Bible frequently refers to God as revealing himself by speaking and often describes the various modes of divine revelation as the Word of God.

A little reflection, however, makes it clear that in the Bible these are metaphors. God is there depicted as revealing himself in three great ways, in creation, in history, and in the life and death of Jesus Christ. The various acts of creation, described in Genesis, are all introduced by the phrase, "And God said." The creative acts are recounted in terms of speech. "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made . . . For he spake and it was done" (Ps. 33:6-9). This is clearly a metaphor based on the fact that speech is a common method of communication and on the belief that in creation God communicates himself. But the emphasis is on the fact that God reveals himself in his creative acts, and there is not the slightest tendency to suggest that this mode of divine self disclosure is literally given in words.

The second way in which the Bible teaches that God declares his nature is in historical events, especially in the history of Israel. In the Old Testament the prophets interpret the history of Israel in such a way that it becomes a vehicle of revelation, and the teaching of the prophets is regularly prefaced by the words, "Thus saith the Lord," or "The word of the Lord came to Hosea" (Hosea 1:2). God is "speaking" in the history of Israel; but this again is obviously a metaphor, the point of which is that God's action in history is a means of communication.

Finally, the revelation of God to man reaches its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The same Word or communicating principle in God which was active in creation and in history was embodied in a human being. The creative and providential power of God "was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory . . . full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son . . . by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb. 1:1-2). The nature and purpose of God became concrete, visible and tangible, so that St. John can speak of "that which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life" (1 Jn. 1:1). It is not so much what this man says, however important and profound his teaching, but rather what he is and does, the way in which he lives and dies, that gives us the truth about God. The truth resides in the person and his acts

The various articles of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds do not formulate certain doctrines but assert that certain acts have taken place or will take place—creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, the second coming and judgment. We therefore begin our professions of faith not with "I believe that," but rather with "I believe in." "Belief that" is directed at theories; "belief in" is related to persons and acts. For the same reason, the great bulk of the Bible consists not of philosophy or theology, in the usual sense, but of stories and of one great story.

J. V. L. Casserley, in his *No Faith of My Own*, points up the implications of the distinction between a philosophical system and a story. A philosophy is set forth in terms of general ideas and abstract conceptions; its obvious vehicle of communication is language. A story is recounted in terms of events, persons and purposeful actions; it is most effectively conveyed in drama and symbolic act. In a recent article the same author suggests that theology should be "related to the spectacle of life as a whole very much as the dramatic critic is related to the drama . . . To interpret drama is not merely to analyse its structure . . . but to unfold its meaning, and the meaning of drama is always dramatic. So that the interpretation of the drama is itself a dramatic event." The truth with which we are concerned in Christianity is "dramatic in its inherent character" and therefore demands drama "as the intellectual mode in which it is grasped and communicated."¹

The view that revelation is conveyed in acts is confirmed by a consideration of the nature of the second aim of God's self-communication. The purpose of God is not only to impart to us the truth about himself so that we may be saved, but also to transmit to us his grace that we may be redeemed. This redemptive purpose of God could certainly not be accomplished by words, in the literal sense, but only by deeds. And according to the Bible, the redemption of man was inaugurated again in the history of Israel and reached its climax in the life and death of Jesus Christ. God saves us by his mighty acts which are, at the same time, also acts of revelation.

The way in which God communicates himself, both for revelation and for redemption, has considerable bearing on the nature of Christian truth, and offers clues to the most effective way in which this truth should be conveyed by us. Because of our addiction to verbalism, we commonly suppose that truth is a property of sentences, theories and doctrines, and we attempt to transmit it by words alone. But according to the interpretation suggested here, the saving truth was given in the first place not in words but in acts. It seems clear, then, that our efforts to impart this truth to our people and to the world should follow this divine procedure.

The twofold aim of God's communication with man is achieved in the drama of God's dealings with the world, in creation, in the history of Israel, and in Jesus Christ. The work of the Church, the new Israel, is to act as the

1. *Anglican Theological Review*, April 1956, pp. 132, 137.

continuing instrument of the revealing and redemptive purposes of God. This is what is meant by the assertion that the Church is the body of Christ. My body is the instrument by which I both reveal myself to my fellows and also accomplish my purposes in the world. In the same way, the Church is the body through which God both discloses his nature to men and thus gives them the truth, and also achieves his saving purpose, conveying to them his grace. The double aim of the divine self-communication is summed up in Christ, who is therefore described as "full of grace and truth." But, as St. Theresa said, Christ has no body now on earth, through which to express his grace and truth, except his Church. The real function of the Church, and of the local congregation which *is* the Church in that place, is to transmit to men the knowledge and the power of God.

Church work, in the deepest meaning of the phrase, is communication, in this highest of all senses. This is what St. Paul refers to as the vocation of all Christians. This vocation, which is "Church work," moves in two directions, one internal and one external. St. Paul speaks of the first task as "the perfecting of the saints," "the edifying of the body of Christ." It is the process by which the body is built up; it is the work of nurturing the members of the body, so that they "may grow up into him in all things who is the head, even Christ" (Ephes. 4:12, 15). This is the task of internal communication.

In attempting to discharge this task, we have made two mistakes. In the first place, we have regarded this work, commonly known as Christian education, as largely the responsibility of the clergy, in so far, at any rate, as its object is the adult portion of the congregation. But this is clearly part of the vocation of all who are fully incorporated into the body. Secondly, we have tended to assume that the aims of Christian education could be accomplished almost entirely by words. These errors are responsible for the very real internal failure of the Church, which is a failure in communication.

This domestic failure in turn results in the Church's failure to discharge its external and missionary task. The Church is in the world, and the congregation is in the local community, not only for purposes of self-edification but also in order to convert the world. "Now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world . . . As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world . . . that the world may believe . . ." (Jn. 17:11, 18, 21). Here we have made the same two mistakes. We have supposed that evangelistic work belonged chiefly to the clergy and that it could be carried out simply by preaching at the world. But there is no point at all in a few individuals trying to tell the world what it is that can alone save the world. It is necessary to show the world by a corporate demonstration. The saving truth was given originally not in words but in acts, and it must continue to be conveyed in the same way. The Word must be made flesh in the life of the Church, and this means in the life of the local congregation.

We must change our methods of communication, and we can learn much from the new techniques now widely employed for secular purposes. The modern view of education, based on facts discovered by the new sciences of man, is specially relevant. This view makes two important points. First, it insists that the human being learns best by participating in some activity. The same emphasis is found in many modern philosophies, in Pragmatism with its motto, "Learn by doing," in Existentialism with its constant reference to decision and involvement, and in Marxism with its stress on *praxis*, illustrated by the saying of its founder, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it,"² or, better, to come to understand it in and through the process of changing it.

If we are suspicious of the method of learning through action, we need to be reminded that this is not just the latest fad but can be regarded as the recovery of a Biblical insight. This is the way in which God communicates with man. And in many a New Testament passage we are instructed to do likewise. "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine" (Jn. 7:17); "Be ye doers of the word" (Jas. 1:22). "I will show you my faith by my works." (Jas. 2:18); "Whosoever heareth my words and doeth them . . ." (Mt. 5:16). Such passages should not be interpreted in an individualistic or even an exclusively moral sense. It is, of course, a matter of practising what we preach, but more than this is involved. These sayings also suggest that we should strive to teach the Christian faith not just in words, in preaching and in verbal instruction, but also through group participation and dramatic action. We must utilize the new understanding of the learning process, of personal relations, and of group behaviour.

This indicates the second point that is stressed in modern educational theory. The emphasis is not only less on words and more on activity, but also less on the individual and more on the group. Not only is it true that we learn by doing but also that we learn by participating in group activities. The human person can only develop in a community of persons. Here again we can accept this point of view not because it is the newest fashion but because it is perfectly consistent with the Christian understanding of the person. For the New Testament teaches that the human being is not simply an isolated individual but a social being who can only achieve personal maturity in the body of Christ and whose destiny is to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

Our vocation, real "Church work," is the work of edifying the body so that the whole life of the congregation, expressed in all its activities and organizations, becomes itself a mode of theological communication, first to its own members, and through them to the world. The essential task of the Church is to mediate the knowledge and power of God to those within the fellowship in such a way that those outside are confronted with a visible and undeniable demonstration of the only way in which the world can be saved.

2. Theses on Feuerbach.

The question as to how this can be accomplished is largely a question of communication. If the problem is to be solved, we must move beyond our preoccupation with words. Taking our cue not only from modern techniques but also from the way in which God, as the Bible portrays him, conveys his grace and truth to man, we must recover and adapt to modern needs and methods the ancient use of act, drama, picture and pageantry. It is one of the weaknesses of modern Protestantism that it has largely abandoned such practices in the interests of a misconceived ministry of the word. There has been a tendency to misinterpret the Word in terms of words, to sacrifice dramatic act for verbal exhortation, and to replace the broken images with rhetoric.

There is, of course, the opposite error, to which Catholicism is prone, of emphasizing the act at the expense of preaching and exposition. It has been said that the principle which should inform the proper conduct of public worship might be expressed in the words "Don't just stand there, do something." While sympathizing with this attitude, we should be aware of the danger of acts separated from explanation and performed for their own sake. This is to relapse into magic and into the *ex opere operato* position in which actions are done without any participation of the heart and mind.

This brings us to the last point. There is something more than slightly absurd about a spate of words, such as this, the apparent aim of which is to disparage the use of words. This article should not be taken as advocating a kind of anti-intellectual pragmatism, of which so-called "progressive" education is often justifiably accused. We are all aware of the fact that the "projects," so dear to the hearts of the progressivists, are frequently aimless and insignificant, that their "group participation" is sometimes merely a method of exchanging ignorant and uninformed opinions, and that their emphasis on "self-expression," "felt needs," and "student-centred" programmes often covers a deficiency in the art of teaching on the part of the instructor, and results in a failure to achieve self-discipline and intellectual excellence on the part of the student.

Recognition of the need for participation, demonstration and dramatic action does not involve the rejection of verbal interpretation, instruction and preaching, of theological formulation and explanation, or of factual and historical information that has to be imparted in the old style. God reveals himself in his creative acts, but his creation has to be explained if it is to become a vehicle of divine revelation. God discloses his will and carries out his purposes in history, but history must be prophetically interpreted before it can be understood in this way. Christ declares the nature of God and redeems the nature of man by his life and death, but he also preached and taught in words. At the same time, we are frequently told in the New Testament that the disciples completely misunderstood his verbal teaching. Even Jesus, that great teacher, could not put the truth into words; he had to do it. He could not explain the Cross; he had to die on the Cross. It was only when he actually died and rose again that the disciples grasped and were grasped by the saving truth.

God reveals himself and saves the world by what he does. As in God's dealings with men, so in our attempts to communicate with our fellows, it is the act that is primary, and the word, while indispensable, secondary. Or, to put it differently, when the act and the word come together, then we have "the true and living Word," the Word of God which is "quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12).

If it is God's purpose to communicate himself to men through the agency of his Church, then the Church and the local congregation which is the Church, must recognize itself and makes itself recognizable as the body of Christ, whose function is to demonstrate and mediate the "grace and truth [which] came by Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:17), and which are the only hope of this bewildered and grievously threatened world.