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A Christian View of Communication

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In this thought-provoking chapter, the author relentlessly pursues the consequences of secularism in our understanding of the relationship of the message and the media. He asks whether we are biblical Christians or evangelical secularists. He affirms that in Christ, the message and the media are inseparable and discusses how this fact changes our understanding of our evangelism. In this person-centred understanding of our task, he discusses how the Church must become the agent of evangelism. He appeals to Christian communicators to go beyond tools and strategies and search for a proper theological basis for evangelism. As an evangelist to educated Hindus, the author clearly puts missiology at the heart of his theology.

Editor

Within a secular frame of reference communication is viewed as the transference of signals from the 'source' to the 'receiver'. Although there are such factors as 'noise' and personal distortions in the process of encoding and decoding, the secular communicator views the message and the medium as two distinct elements in the communication process. This must be recognized as an inherent dualism prompted by the approach to knowledge which secularism has absolutized.

This dualism is inevitable if we perceive through a secular frame of reference, as Prof. John Macmurray makes plain in *The Self as Agent*:

... any philosophy which takes the 'cogito' as its starting point and centre of reference institutes a formal dualism of theory and practice; and that this dualism makes it formally impossible to give any account, and indeed to conceive the possibility of persons and relation, whether the relation be theoretical—as knowledge, or practical—as co-operation. For thought is essentially private.¹

This dualism becomes inherent in the very pattern of thinking of those of us who have been socialized in the contemporary cultural [p. 252](#) environment. Consequently, the means and end, the message and medium, are viewed in isolation, independent of each other. When the medium is viewed as an impersonal tool, the message itself becomes an impersonal object, idea, or fact that is conveyed. This not only transforms the nature of the message, but the object of communication then is to coerce or manipulate the audience to think, choose, or act as desired. This impersonal *intent* not only depersonalizes the receivers of the message, but also dehumanizes the communicators themselves.

The assumption is that the end justifies the means. The medium is but a tool to convey the message. The message then becomes objectified. It becomes a product. It is conceived of as a consumer product, to be neatly and cleverly packaged and distributed *en masse* to the consumers, who are supposed to be the passive receptors of mass media communication. The whole frame of reference within which the secularist views communication is sub-personal.

¹ John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p. 73.

THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Could a Christian communicator accept what we have just stated to be in harmony with the gospel? Most of us have never paused to question the secular frame of reference. We have simply taken it for granted as a basic, unalterable fact of life. One of the radical questions we need to ask is: In what ways is the Christian concept of communication distinct from the secular concept of communication?

Would it be Christian to conceive of communication as a mechanistic process? Can we objectivize the gospel without altering its character? Can we package and distribute the gospel assuming that it is a consumer product? Can we assume that either the communicators or the receivers of the gospel message are isolated individuals, not persons-in-relation?

To consider any of the above assumptions valid from a Christian perspective would be to assume a dualism between the message and the medium. To assume this is to imply that the starting point of our thinking is the absolutization of the objective methodology. This is to acknowledge that in practice we are not Christian in our thinking. In our very frame of reference we have become secularists. Evangelical secularists.

The Christian gospel is embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In him message and medium are inseparable. God has spoken to us, says the writer of Hebrews, 'in his Son' ([Heb. 1:1](#)). The apostle John writes, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. [p. 253 1:14](#)). And again 'God so loved the world that he gave his Son' ([Jn. 3:16](#)). God has given us in Christ not merely a verbal message but a person. And Jesus Christ has given us not only his verbal teaching but his very life on the cross. In Christ the medium is the message.

In the training of the Twelve our Lord not only conveyed information and instruction to his disciples. He gave himself to them, in love, in communion, and in the community of a shared life together. They had been with Jesus. And even their enemies could not fail to see Christ in the disciples. 'Now as they observed the boldness of Peter and John, and noted that they were untrained laymen, they began to wonder, then recognized them as former companions of Jesus' ([Acts 4:13](#) NEB). The communion that they shared with Christ was aimed at the formation of a shared, divine-human relational self. And this ought to be true of us as his disciples in the twentieth century through the communion of the Holy Spirit ([2 Cor. 13:14](#)).

Christian communication then, is characteristically personal. Both the message and the medium are personal. And consequently, they cannot be wrenched apart. If they are, they both become sub-personal and the gospel becomes another gospel.

THE CHURCH IS THE AGENT FOR EVANGELISM

A Church, or a group of Christians, is able to communicate the gospel when it constitutes a community of disciples who are in mutual personal communion with:

- (a) the Infinite Tri-personal God,
- (b) one another as fellow disciples,
- (c) and the communities of non-Christians in the environment.

This ability to communicate becomes a reality when they co-operate to fulfil the divinely commissioned purpose.

Confronted with the task of world evangelization, have we not been asking the wrong questions? Instead of asking what are the best tools and strategies, we need first to ask

what is the proper theological basis for evangelism. Tools if used merely as a means to an end, without an understanding of their inherent nature, will tend only to objectivize the message. This creates a dichotomy between medium and message. Tools, whether technological or psychological, ought not to be our primary concern.

The primary questions that we need to grapple with, and which are rooted in the theological presuppositions of the gospel, are the following: p. 254

(a) Is our failure in evangelism because our communion with God is weak and superficial?

(b) Is this because our communion with our fellow disciples is weak and superficial, so that we are merely a collectivity of autonomous individuals, instead of being a dynamic Christian community of persons-in-relation?

(c) Is this because we do not have any genuine personal relationships, and communication links with members of non-Christian communities in our environment?

Together with a careless disregard for the above theological reasons for our failure to communicate, there is today an obsession with the tools we have invented for communication. So that now there is the danger of us ourselves becoming unconsciously a tool in the service of these tools. We seem to have become so enamoured with the tools, which are really artefacts of the secular culture, that we fail to ask the basic questions:

(1) What is the nature of these tools?

(2) Is the nature of these tools in harmony with the nature of the gospel?

As we have seen, the very method of approach to knowledge on which the present secular culture is propped furthers a dualism. There is a dualism between thought and practice, means and end, medium and message. In keeping with the spirit of the age, have we too come to assume that the end justifies the means? Do we not look at the means of mass communication merely as tools which transfer the message intact from the communicator to the audience?

NUMBNESS CAUSED BY EXTENDING MEDIA.

Every form of media innovation is an effort to extend one or more of our senses.² This creates a *narcosis* or numbness of the senses involved. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act. It alters the way we perceive the world. This creates a distortion in our 'sensorium', or the dynamic balance and proportion between our five senses. When this balance is disturbed, it alters us psychologically and socially. In other words, the extending medium itself constitutes a message, which beyond the overt verbal message, conveys a nonverbal P. 255 message which influences us subconsciously. This alters us more radically than the verbal message.

The electronic mass media are an extension of our central nervous system.³ When exposed to them, it is our central nervous system itself that is numbed, giving us the illusion of total participation. It draws us into a global village and into a sense of community in which our very individuality is lost.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Sphere Books, London, 1964, 51.

³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*, Bantam Books, New York, 1967, p. 49.

The typographical revolution of print had the effect of individualizing us and alienating us from social relationships.⁴ The electronic revolution of instant communication takes the process of depersonalization one step further and drowns us into a totalitarian collectivistic community, in which our individuality and privacy is swallowed up in an illusion of total involvement.

All media that are an extension of our senses diminish the personal quality of face-to-face communication. They range from semi-personal to non-personal. The subliminal, non-rational influence on the users and receivers of mass-media communication is to make them non-persons. If salvation is God's way of transforming us from a splintered person into an integrated person, any means that depersonalizes us must be viewed with caution.

HOW CAN WE BE LIBERATED?

The first concern of a Church caught in the stream of a secularized culture is to refuse to be conditioned by its alien values and premises. The presuppositions of the culture in which we are socialized root themselves deeply in our sub-conscious minds. Although our verbal message may be orthodox and personal, our non-verbal modes of communicating it could so neutralize the message as to make it another gospel.

Instead of asking how we can use mass media in a more personal way, we need to first ask: how can I become a more integrated person? How can I be disengaged from the influence of the presuppositions and values of the secular culture that has depersonalized me?

We need to examine the presuppositions, values, and ideology of the cultural system by which we are surrounded. We have to view every aspect of it from a Christian frame of reference. We have to view [p. 256](#) the worth of each of its components from Christ's perspective ([1 Cor. 2:16](#)). Where these components are not in harmony with his mind, we ought to refuse to conform to the prevalent norms.

As Christians, to be non-cognizant of the nature of the culture in which we live and consequently to allow our minds, attitudes, and habits to be moulded by the prevalent culture, is called cultural containment. Against the danger of cultural containment the apostle Paul has warned us in no uncertain terms:

Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect ([Rom. 12:2](#) NEB).

CHRISTIAN RADICALS

To refuse to conform to the values and presuppositions of the prevalent system, is to be recognized by those around us as radicals and rebels. That is, if we live by a different set of presuppositions and values from those of the people around us, we ought to know what our Christian presuppositions and values are. We ought also to know those of the prevalent cultural system. As committed Christians, we must be able to point out the distinctives of the Christian frame of reference.

If we are ignorant of what constitutes the difference in presuppositions and values of the biblical faith and secularism, we will rightly be branded by those around us as blind fanatics. We will be unable to give a reason for the hope we cherish. Under the

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1962.

circumstances we will find ourselves taking an anti-intellectual stance, while we become unconsciously the victims of cultural containment. To stress our difference from those around us we will then be forced to make a set of rules related to the secondary issue of the faith and legislate that those who are to be identified with us must conform to these norms.

This may lead to a reversal of Charles Simeon's commendable principle:

In essentials, unity:

In non-essentials, liberty:

And in all things, charity.

An anti-intellectual stance coupled with our becoming victims of cultural containment could reverse this to:

In essentials, disunity:

In non-essentials, legality:

And in nothing, charity. [p. 257](#)

As victims of cultural containment, instead of viewing every aspect of the secular culture through the person-oriented, Christian frame of reference, we begin to view the Christian faith through the spectacles of an impersonal, secular frame of reference. The result is that we begin to see the Christian faith merely as a set of verbal doctrines. What is important, then, is not if anyone cares to practise them, but that every member should hold the right set of doctrines with orthodox verbal accuracy. This leads to a pseudo-orthodoxy which legalizes the gospel and reduces it into a set of formulae.

WHAT DO PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS MEAN TO US?

Viewed through the secular frame of reference, communication is understood as a mechanistic process that transfers information about the gospel, packaged in neat formulas, with the intent of manipulating the receptors. As witnesses of Jesus Christ, we have no excuse to change the gospel into a marketable commodity. The conditioning influence of secular premises on us as Christians may be measured by our attitude to the impersonal tools of mass communication, and our understanding or lack of understanding of the relation between message and media. Those who are consciously or sub-consciously guided by the Christian frame of reference will prefer the personal medium for communicating the gospel. Those who are secularized and individualized naturally prefer to use tools and techniques rather than offer themselves as the medium to convey the message of the gospel.

Only those who have been disenchanted by the secular myth of the worth of mass communication tools and psychological techniques can realize the preciousness and inestimable worth of personhood and personal relationships. The apostle Paul was enraptured by the interpenetration of selves that he experienced between himself and Christ. He was filled with the marvel of the divine-human relational self that was formed in the course of his personal communion with his Lord. He writes:

But whatever things were gain to me, those I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ ([Phil. 3:7, 8](#) NASB).

What value do we place on the integrating power of the New Covenant relationship with God through Christ, and the healing, [p. 258](#) satisfying quality of personal

relationships with one another as fellow disciples of Christ? Are we so enamoured by the tools and techniques of science, that we have unconsciously devalued the worth of personhood and personal relationships?

Paul valued his personal relationship with Christ and with fellow members of the body of Christ as of prime worth. We tend to worship our technological and psychological *tools* so devotedly that we are willing to offer the personal message of the gospel as a sacrifice to it. And when the personal message of the gospel of Jesus Christ passes through the grid of our sophisticated artefacts, it comes out at the other end as an impersonal message and another gospel.

We ought not to allow ourselves to be deceived by the apparent successes that Communists, certain religious sects and business corporations claim to have had with the help of mass communication. Their end or objective, which is to manipulate people to think or act as desired, justifies the sub-personal means employed. What is our objective in evangelism? Is it to manipulate people by subversive means? We may deny any such motive. But our real motives must be measured not by what we say, but by what we do. This means that what we spontaneously prefer may be a better index of the shift in values and presuppositions that we have undergone.

BASIS FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Within the secular frame of reference the unit for human interaction and communication is the individual, the mass, or a group viewed as an aggregate of individuals. Within the Christian frame of reference the unit is person-in-relation or person-in-community. The human person is man in reciprocal relation with the Tri-personal God, with other human beings and the natural environment.

The secular man does not know his fellowman as a person but as an object to be used or manipulated. Today, we tend to perceive society not as communities of persons in relationship. In an earlier age, people belonged to communities in order to have personal identity. Today, we are compelled to be integral members of bureaucracies, whether educational, vocational, religious, recreational, governmental or economic. Within these systems, our relationships are functional not personal, mechanical not human. Consequently, we are but individuals, or individual cogs and screws of complicated bureaucratic machinery.

If this is what we have become, and what we are conditioned to, we can have no ideological basis for interpersonal communion. Where [p. 259](#) there is no interpersonal communion, there can be no community of persons either. Where there is no community of persons in mutual personal relations, there is no basis for meaningful interpersonal communication. Where the basic unit of society is assumed to be the sub-personal individual, there can be no genuine communion, community or communication. All that we are left with is an atomized mass of people, or a totalitarian state of individuals held together by force or fear.

The basic unit of a viable community is 'person'. Where the personhood of man is lost because of an impersonal apperception, no interpersonal communion or community can arise. This rules out the possibility of genuine communication also.

The problem of a breakdown of communication in our day is not limited to the Church. The whole of modern society faces this problem. Outside of the Church it may not seem to be as acute a problem. Societies and governments in the world today do not intend to create a community of persons. They may well try to 'use' the concept of inter-personal communication, communion and community as psychological devices to achieve their non-personal and antipersonal ends.

The message of the Church, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ, has as its goal, on the other hand, the formation of a community of persons in communion with God and their fellowmen. Such a community would also live in a harmonious, responsible relationship with the natural physical universe. This is the ultimate purpose of God in history, and is summarized by the expression 'the kingdom of God'. It is expressed by the apostle Paul in the words:

Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross—to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through him alone ([Col. 1:20](#) NEB).

He made known to us his hidden purpose ...

namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ ([Eph. 1:9, 10](#) NEB).

Consequently, the end and means of the gospel are inseparable. The goal of the gospel, which is person-in-community, must be achieved through personal communion and personal communication.

WHAT MODES OF COMMUNICATION DO WE PREFER?

Have the agents who seek to communicate this message become secularized? Have they individualized themselves with an impersonal **P. 260** apperception? This is the crucial question evangelical churches need to ask with honesty and sincerity. Do we prefer impersonal methods and strategies for the communication of the gospel? Are we investing more of our personnel and resources in impersonal and semi-personal modes of evangelism, while paying proportionately less attention to the business of maintaining genuine personal communion with God, our fellow disciples and our non-Christian neighbours?

The latest fad in the evangelical circle is 'community' and 'group dynamics'. This personal method can be used as an impersonal tool. If used as an impersonal tool, it can only produce impersonal results. The problem today is not with our tools and techniques, our methods and strategies. The problem is us ourselves. This has come home to the writer with startling force at the end of a protracted search for a more effective strategy in evangelism.

The question of prime importance then is: Who am I? A right or wrong self-understanding can make the crucial difference in indicating whether we are biblical Christians or evangelical secularists. Do I think of myself as a 'person' or as an 'individual'? The difference in self apperception could indicate to us whether our real, informal, subconscious frame of reference is biblical or secular. To make an honest self-appraisal is undoubtedly very difficult. There are many hidden reasons why we will want to evade a truthful answer.

This is also a most difficult area in which to bring about a change, even after we come to accept the truth that our real presuppositions and values are secular. The schizophrenia of which we are victims seems to be that of holding a biblical frame of reference in our conscious minds, while our subconscious, informal frame of reference is secular. Honestly admitting to this as our illness and taking definite steps towards achieving an integrated frame of reference, and consequently becoming integrated persons, could in the gracious providence of God have a reforming and revitalizing influence on the character of our local church communities. Then we can joyfully expect a new day in evangelism.

Failure on our part to conduct an honest self-examination, and to act on the basis of the truth as the Spirit of the Lord illumines our understanding, may close the door to the possibility of reformation and revival for our generation of the Church. let us be quite clear in our minds about this: only a break-through in a rediscovery of biblical truth, by being unshackled from the conditioning influence of secularism, will bring with it a break-through in evangelism in our day. By merely redoubling our efforts or multiplying our tools and techniques, while we cling tenaciously to our secular frame of [p. 261](#) reference and values, will achieve nothing of real value to God. On the contrary, we may bring only judgment upon ourselves.

THE TASK OF THEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

The task ahead is one of a thorough-going theological reformation, starting from the very roots, our method of approach to knowledge. Will our evangelical churches rise up to the theological task ahead, or will we continue to be bogged down by secondary problems of tools and strategies of communication with which we are at present preoccupied? Will we choose conveniently to side-step the real issue, because it may cost us the painful dissolution of the bureaucratic machinery we have so laboriously constructed in the name of evangelism?

The task we confront is colossal. We need to be cured of our deep-rooted duplicity in holding simultaneously to a biblical frame of reference and to a secular frame of reference. This goes to make us schizophrenics, with a double set of presuppositions and values, which are mutually incompatible. We need to become integrated persons by rediscovering the biblical, person-oriented approach to knowledge and by understanding what constitutes divine and human personhood. Then a whole generation of Christians who have been socialized and conditioned by the secular culture have to be taught to think and see differently. This will involve the formation of visible Christian communities which demonstrate the social and behavioural form of a culture that is characteristically Christian.

We need to disengage from the secular myth that we are autonomous individuals, if we are to become churches that are communities of persons in vital reciprocal relationship with God, fellow disciples and non-Christian communities. Only when we become churches that are local communities of Christians in personal communion, shall we be communicating communities.

This amounts to the visible demonstration of the value and power of persons-in-relation in local church communities. The only one who is a perfectly integrated person is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is in the New Covenant relationship that we enter into an act of mutual self-committal with God and with fellow disciples and thus become integrated persons. All other tools and techniques designed to make us integrated persons are but poor substitutes. It is in the experience of being 'in him' and 'he in us' that we become authentic persons. 'The secret is this: Christ in you, the hope of glory ...' ([Col. 1:27](#) NEB).

Evangelism is the function of a community of persons. Our present [p. 262](#) efforts to evangelize in the absence of such church communities must be recognized as pseudo-evangelism. Only a return to biblical presuppositions, and a rediscovery of the biblical truth of personhood, is likely to restore our churches to being genuine, functioning Christian communities. Efforts are being multiplied to 'induce' community by the application of the findings of the sociology of small groups and group dynamics. The insights that these sciences give are useful. But as long as they are applied within a secular frame of reference they can only produce 'results' and statistics which can lead only to the formation of pseudo-Christian communities.

Our theological apperception and our Christian activity is still largely motivated and guided by secular presuppositions and values. Unless our frame of reference itself is biblical and Christian, we are likely to continue to be the victims of cultural containment. We must first become aware of the real problem instead of being busily preoccupied with false ones. Then we need to become concerned enough to act, starting with ourselves and the local church of which we are members.

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Can We Ignore One Billion Illiterates?

According to John Kenyon, 'In the world today there are nearly one billion adults who are illiterate. 98% of them live in the Third World. Of the adults that cannot read or write, about 2/3 are women.' This probably means that about 30% of all the adults of the world are illiterate or are functionally so. And the number is increasing, not decreasing, as more and more children are born in the growing urban slums and large numbers become functionally non-literate, losing the ability to read. Any theology of communication or programme for communicating the good news must take this situation seriously, but I doubt if many are doing so. I am not aware of any theological college which is training its students in how to reach the orally-based peoples of the world. Our training focuses on reaching the literate, and especially the middle and upper classes. Evangelicalism is a middle class suburban religion.

Our theologians are concerned with articulating a biblically faithful gospel, and rightly so. But their understanding of communication is limited to a logical, linear and systematized presentation of the gospel, illustrated of course with a few stories. The approach is confrontational and the appeal is for a cerebral response. However, people who for generations have relied on oral communication live in a very different cultural framework. The majority belong to the Two-Thirds World but the illiterates in the Western world are not markedly different from them. They belong to oppressed minority communities and to the urban poor of the inner city. Such people (from the south or the north) think visually and concretely, rather than abstractly and logically as literate people do. They learn and remember through colourful symbols and pictures and through physical contact and action. Among such people, proverbs are highly developed and skilfully used. The illiterate think intuitively rather than rationally. They are awed by the mysteries of life and, in their struggle for survival, look for synthesis, whereas those conscious of their education give greater priority to analysis, to logical sequence and scientific verification.

The illiterates find it difficult to remember lengthy prose. They are much more at home with poetry, with stories, with song and ballads. In the training of evangelists and pastors, little attention is given to these audio-visual media. I'm not aware of any Theological School that teaches its students how to write poetry or construct parables, or teach theology through stories. But Jesus certainly did this. To those who were conscious of their righteousness and despised others, Jesus told a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. In answering the question 'Who is my neighbour?', Jesus told a story of how a Samaritan helped a Jew, robbed on the road side. When his [p. 264](#) enemies tried to trick him on a political issue, Jesus asked for a coin and asked, 'Whose inscription is this?'