



Communicating in the Community¹

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The community of believers is engaged in two vital communication processes. (There are three if you include the conversational significance of the spiritual walk with God through Jesus Christ.) In terms of functional and interpersonal communication, the individual Christian has two communities with which to relate. For the purpose of this paper, the two are designated as the “community of believers” and the “outer community.” These two sets of communications are deeply interrelated, so much so that the primary messages of the one become the secondary messages of the other, whether we like it or not.

The outer community is learning about the Christ we proclaim not only through the outward-directed media from our community, but also through observations made of our relationships within the community of believers. Similarly, nurture within the community of believers is affected not only by the direct communications of so-called “Christian education,” but by the observations that Christians make of the messages their own community is sending to the outer community. Indeed, for the members of some congregations the basis of their inadequate nurture is a series of repeated exposures to the “plan of salvation”—a case of the community of believers attempting to be nourished on the most elementary communications intended for the outer community. Even the “newborn” Christian is entitled to a more nourishing diet of the milk of the Word! (Consider: the milk of the Word is for the Christian; the rudiments of salvation are for the outer community.)

These two sets of communications—within the community and with the outer community—are deeply interrelated and the distinction between the sets is often not recognized. Therefore, we will examine each form of communication in order to assist understanding.

The Basis of the Community’s Communication

The relationship among the words *communication*, *community*, and *unity* is significant. Language is a reflection of human experience. It is rarely an accident that certain words are closely related to each other. That the word *unity* is embedded in *community* is a linguistic representation of a relationship that exists in life. That *community* is embedded in *communication* is another linguistic reflection of human experience. It is amazing that the cultural heritage can be overlooked and earlier understandings ultimately lost despite the linguistic reminders! Yet today in the wake of the communication revolution, there are too few who understand that communication depends to a great extent on the existence of real community. The “sharing in common” that *is* community is essential to the exchange of ideas that *is* communication. In order to communicate, people must share language (verbal and/or non-verbal); they must share interests, values, and sensitivities. All of these are based on past experiences. Thus, at the risk of oversimplification, it can be said that communication depends on the sort of past experience that community provides.

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Community, in turn, depends on *unity*. Even among the Founding Fathers of this nation, the dependency was understood. The document that gets the most popular attention is the Declaration of Independence, and contemporary Americans tend to embrace it (often superficially) because of their fierce individualism. But the independence it declared was the independence of the community of Americans as a whole, not from each other, but from a resented distant government.

The more important document, having the status of legal foundation of the Republic, is the Constitution. The Constitution, together with its amendments, speaks of rights of the individual, but its major burden and primary focus is on the ways to build and maintain unity. Community of the States was not possible short of a basic and transcendent unity. *E Pluribus Unum* ["one from many"] reflects the goal, but the unity itself is dependent on identifying and nurturing the purposes, goals, and values that provide central focus. The Founding Fathers seem to have understood the basis of unity. The Preamble to the Constitution is given to the building of unity through purpose. "We . . . in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity . . ."

Whole new "communities" (more descriptively called "societal conglomerates") are failing to get off the ground because no essential unity has been identified or nurtured. Many parts of certain American cities are disintegrating for the same reason: lack of unity—in the sense of a single set of purposes, goals, values, or on-going experiences that could provide a central focus upon which to establish a sense of community. Pearl Buck is currently involved in a fascinating unity-builds-community project in Danby, Vermont. With her keen awareness of the relationships of the individual and the community, and her Asian experiences in village/city interdependence, she is helping Danby residents find a common purpose through refurbishing and putting to gainful use several historic buildings in the center of the village. She is helping to rebuild a dying community by helping its citizens find common purposes, goals, and values. This example is local and hardly apt to change the world, but it illustrates the point that to the extent that unity can be established, community can develop.

Communication within the community is dependent on the vitality of the sense of community. Communication of the community of believers, with relation to the outer community, is similarly dependent on the vitality of the community. Effective communication must have "heart" and it must be backed up by reality. All of this ultimately rests on unity of identity and purpose.



Of all institutions, the church has the most clear-cut basis for unity. Whether or not the church as an aggregate of management units can, in fact, reflect unity, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ compels Christians to unity with one another in Christ. When Jesus prayed that his disciples would be made one with each other, the language was figurative but certainly to be understood practically.

To relegate "unity of the believers" to a purely spiritual relationship is to deny the behavioral reality of living as a Christian. Certainly the *Acts of the Apostles* reflects that the early believers felt a sense of identity and obligation to one another. In an earlier era within our own country, and most especially among the large immigrant groups of the nineteenth century (both Protestant and Catholic) a sense of unity among believers provided the basis for many strong communities. Within several states today there are vestiges of these communities whose original unity was the unity of believers. (In some cases, these communities are now maintained on the unity of idiosyncratic identity.) Because of their views of the Scriptures and their "old world" characteristics, not all of these groups were inclined to be communicative with the outer community, but they were marvelously communicative within their own communities.

Why doesn't the church today reflect more community? Perhaps the answer is that the underlying unity has not been developed and maintained within recent years. Such an answer, for all its sincerity, must be kept in perspective. First, the reference here is to the church in the United States—the church in certain other countries shows a high degree of community. Second, there are notable exceptions to the answer suggested. There are, in fact, relics of the earlier church communities, especially in rural pockets, and there are new forms of community arising from the anti-establishment and reform movements among young urban Christians.

Communications within the Community of Believers

Although the intentional messages of the church to the outer community are relatively simple and direct, the messages *within* the community are complex and elegant. They encompass the perpetuation and development of lifestyles and a whole ethical system in terms of the world-and-life view of scriptural Christianity. These within-the-community communications constitute the major educational tasks of the church. We understand that the home plays a vital role in this communicating and educating, and we augment the home by establishing school-like operations—Sunday *school*, vacation Bible *school*, “Christian day *school*,” and the “Christian college.”

In the minds of most Americans, education is too readily equated with schooling. Ours is a school-oriented society wherein schooling serves as the ladder of socio-economic progress, technological advancement and social mobility. This sort of education is a system of buildings, campuses, dedicated blocks of time, abstractions from reality and symbolic hurdles, stages and achievements called courses, grades, certificates, and degrees. Schooling, for many, is a sort of Lobster Quadrille² performed because it is good to be performed. Except for the fact that society naively pays obeisance to its symbolisms, its values are dubious and its processes are largely ineffectual for many who most need its help.

In the current re-examination of the strengths and weaknesses of educational enterprises in the public and private sectors, the case against schooling is becoming strong. Anthropologists and those educational theorists concerned with the roles and modes of education within society (for example, Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire) are now making sharper distinctions among three sets of educative modes: the informal, the formal, and the nonformal.

1. *Informal* education is the sort that is present in all cultures. It is exemplified in the way language skills are transmitted during the first few years of life; children learn to use their mother tongue because they are in an environment where the stimuli and rewards for learning are virtually integrated with the entirety of life experience. Informal education occurs because the milieu elicits and supports certain behaviors.
2. *Formal* education is that aspect of education that the layperson associates with the word “education.” It consists of schooling and other organized, ability- or age-scaled, scheduled, and overtly declared instructional functions within the culture. Formal education includes the public and private sectors, from kindergarten through swimming class.
3. *Nonformal* education is the Cinderella currently coming into the limelight. Educators who are disillusioned with the failure of formal education to deliver on its oversell are rediscovering that there are, in most cultures, extensive educative functions that operate in contrast with formal education. Nonformal education includes activities that are more-or-less scheduled, somewhat scaled (usually in terms of interests of the learner rather than by age or other arbitrary standards), and usually not identified as part of the mainline educational establishment. Though trade schools are a borderline case, symphony orchestras, museums,

² See Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland*.

libraries, literary and discussion clubs, family planning services, social and welfare counseling services, and many other examples of nonformal education come to mind.

The distinctions among these three sets of educative modes are important for several reasons. First, the tendency to over-rely on formal modes has militated against creative uses of nonformal modes and against proper recognition of the vitality of the informal modes. (Reflect on the fact that most humans master language, the most complex cognitive learning of life, by age five or six. The school then spends twelve years struggling to induce learning far less complex and less competently achieved!)

The second importance of the distinctions is the recognition that purposeful, goal-oriented educational communications can utilize nonformal modes to augment or replace the more costly formal modes. While this latter point constitutes a threat to the schooling establishment, it can be a welcome incentive to the church. The church has utilized informal and nonformal modes of education as its basic communication media within its community since the time of Christ. Now these very modes—affinity clubs, camping experiences, discussion groups, dinner parties, seminars, special short-term study institutes, counseling sessions, and the like, are coming into their own as educational media.

Communications with the Outer Community

Communication is organic. Communication is an extension of the living organism or the living social structure. Open persons or systems communicate with candor and transparency, not using their messages to create false images of themselves.

Manipulation is the communication of a diseased person or system. The communication of a closed system or a non-relating person works for obscurity of the true state of things in favor of a contrived (manipulated) view of itself and its relation to the target of the communication. In lower forms of life, this sort of communication often appears within patterns of predatory behavior. Getting the targets of communication to do what they would not do if they had “the whole story” is manipulation.

Manipulative communication within the community of believers and communication on behalf of the community of believers should not be encouraged. From a position of values, the Christian need not engage in “selling Christ” through half-truths or distortions. Since God is truth and his Word is truth, it is neither necessary nor feasible to “sell Christ” through less than completely honest messages.



Since the community of believers is essentially a purpose-oriented community, communication plays purpose-fulfilling roles. Comprehensive definitions of communication are based on the idea of transferring ideas or data from one mind to another. Broad views of communicative processes are useful in many situations, but in terms of its roles with regard to the community of believers, communication needs to be defined in terms of purpose and achievement.

A behavioral view of communication and education makes one uneasy about the prevalent idea that the obligation of the church is to give the outer community “a chance to hear.” Such a concept of the obligation of the church tends to produce a view of communication as a one-way process. If all we are to do is to give people a chance to hear, then communication can be accomplished by telling, informing, showing, and broadcasting. Each of these words connotes a one-way flow of information. The objectives implied by these terms are summarized as *exposure*. Purposeful communication, by contrast, involves a two-way flow of information, from sender to receiver and back to the sender again in such a way as to allow the sender to re-shape and re-send the message. The objectives of purposeful communication are expressed in terms of changes in the receiver, not merely in terms of the sender’s quantity of dump-out.

The Present Need

For one reason or another, many of today's young people have become keenly aware of the lack of community in the American lifestyle. A handful are able precisely to identify their frustration as arising from rampant individualism; many others are reacting irrationally to the vacuum of common goals, to the lack of identity, and to the self-seeking achievement syndrome that has become characteristic of so many Americans.

The war has much to do with this nearly complete collapse of community in the United States. Given modern communication technologies and a relatively unrestricted press, it is inevitable that a nation locked so long in so unclear a cause, on such dubious premises, would be disintegrated. Wars have curiously contrasting effects on those who indulge: a cause held by the masses to be in their common interest can weld unity even in the face of probable defeat and oppression, but a cause for which support is seriously divided and for which the masses cannot be rallied is sure to cost dearly in terms of moral and cultural degradation, even if the conflict itself can be won. Such are the history lessons so conveniently overlooked by those whose ethnocentric idealism becomes an obsession. (That America can serve as the righteous arbiter of the issues of the world is ethnocentric idealism gone berserk.)

If the Good Fairy were to grant me one wish, I think I'd ask for a year (or maybe just a month) of living in a *real* community. There are so few communities, and so few of us ever get the opportunity to become part of one. Although life there isn't all milk and honey, a sort of frustrated envy creeps over me when I visit friends in a *kibbutz*. For all its shortcomings, Walden II rather intrigues me; and as for the Oneida, Amana, and other experiments in communal living—I can only wish that history weren't so persistent; I'd far rather believe that these attempts to create heaven on earth were more successful!

But if my wish were granted, I might find myself in trouble. Notice that I stipulated a limited time span for my ecstatic experience in a real community. I'm not at all sure that I could adjust to the demands a community would make of me. Having been enculturated rather thoroughly to a competitive, individualistic society, it could be most uncomfortable to become a fledgling in a true community!

I believe that longing for a profound sense of community is a response to the Lordship of Christ. Since Christ has made me part of the body that is the church, and since his glorification has become my primary objective, it seems only appropriate that a sense of community with other believers should follow. I think I am ready to feel at one with any and all who want to find ways to so order our lives that the transcendent importance of Jesus Christ takes first place in our common goals. Must we always assume that since it will be hard to put this principle to work in our community that there is no use in trying? Not to try will further impede the communication of Christ in the world.

Communication within and from the community of believers is dependent on the reality and awareness of community implied in Romans 12. Even a casual evaluation of the messages sent to the outer community by the church reveals two weaknesses. The first weakness is the lack of a clear, single voice. Though a monolithic and standardized proclamation is hardly to be desired, cogency and coherency should be expected as an evidence of the singleness of the God of creation, the Christ of redemption, and the Holy Spirit at work in us. But what does the outer community see? Weird and wonderful variations on an all-but-lost theme. Small wonder it is that one of the most common responses to the communications of the Gospel is, "Why are there so many different kinds of Christianity?"

The second weakness is even harder to justify; the messages that the outer community "reads" are in two forms—verbal and non-verbal—and the two forms are often in conflict. Christians as individuals, congregations as a whole, and denominations as entities are constantly

under examination for consistency. North American Christianity will spend the rest of this century under indictment for the past generations of silence on matters of social injustice, the “fellowship of believers” will continue to be regarded as a sham so long as ultra-separatism is more highly valued than cooperation within the community of believers; and the church’s concern for lost humanity will be suspect so long as that concern has only a spiritual dimension. Communicating Christ in this country and from our shores is profoundly difficult inasmuch as the verbal messages are so often negated by the non-verbal messages.

Summary

Coherent communication must be based on community. The community’s internal behavior must be consistent with its external messages if they are to be believable. Unity is the basis of existence of the community; a community *is* a behavioral manifestation of unity. Unity is a product of common identity and common purpose.

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The unity of the community of believers is in the Lordship of Christ. The community of believers acts out their responses to his Lordship. Therefore, effective communication within the community and with the outer community depends ultimately on the acceptance of the Lordship of Christ by and among those who are called by his name.