



# Communicating the Word in the Seventies<sup>1</sup>

---

Ted Ward

Whenever technical or scientific propositions become popular, it pays to be a bit suspicious. Things that become popular too easily often have little depth. Within the church, as elsewhere within the contemporary American scene, communication is becoming one of the more popular pseudo-technical words. It is important that we ask, “Why?”

Until you look closely at the matter, communication can be assumed to be one of the desirable universals. But although it might seem logical to argue that *everybody* wants to communicate effectively, the facts don’t follow. Deception and confusion seem sometimes to be preferable to openness, clarity, and honesty. But on behalf of a cause, and when motivated to share that cause, communication is the name of the game. Within the church of Jesus Christ, and especially with regard to the Word of God, there is a particular necessity to be concerned with communication. Christianity is not properly a static religion. From the examples set by Jesus’ behavior, from his directives to his followers, and from the documentary evidence concerning his followers’ behavior, Christianity comes to us as actively involved in outgoing processes of communication. More specifically, the communication implicit in Christianity is purposeful and objectives-oriented. Contemporary behavioral scientists are usually looking at this sort of communication when they try to obtain more clear understandings of the dynamics of behavior change.

Is there anything new in the surge of attention to communication? Even if there is something going on in the secular world, does it follow that there is something in the popularity of communication that *ought* to affect the church? Here are the prior questions that we have too easily overlooked in our eagerness not to be too far behind. But most of us know full well that it is better to be left behind than to be on the wrong train. If all we are going to do in the contemporary “communication revolution” is adopt some new names for old processes, count me out. If there is to be any constructive impact on the church and on the mission of the church, we must first be very clear about what that mission really is. Frankly, relating the powerful new technologies of communication for behavior change to such an unclear entity as the contemporary evangelical church makes me uneasy.

But let’s get on with a guided tour of the “communication revolution”—more properly, the era of awareness and scientific inquiry into communication. In paragraphs ahead, we will consider the Seventies as an era for new resources, as an era for reducing fantasy, and as the era for the church to come alive.

## 1. An Era for New Resources

The technology for the communication revolution is already here. If invention and discovery were to stop altogether, we would still need to recognize how to effectively assimilate the technological resources now available. Of course the dizzy reality is that invention and discovery will *not* stop, and by the end of the Seventies we will likely get together again to observe that it will take us two *more* decades to assimilate what is *then* available. Such is the nature of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared for presentation to the Association for Accreditation of Bible Colleges conference. Chicago IL, October 29, 1970

snowball and avalanche of progress. An exhaustive inventory of recent innovations in communication would be exhausting. Instead of reciting a long list, consider a few examples: While television and the many television-related devices have been getting most of the attention, there has been an incredible development of the uses of print. Comparison of books, magazines, and posters of today with those of twenty and thirty years ago will give you a taste of what has been going on. But it is far deeper than appearances. The use of graphics is sophisticated today—not merely a reflection of the development of tastes and forms in art, but an application of psychological theory to the undergirding of verbal messages with non-verbal reinforcements. Charles Schulz' *Peanuts* isn't the most sophisticated example we can find, but it is fun to talk about. Here is a remarkable blending of very simple graphics and very carefully designed verbal communication. I'm ready to credit Schulz with more communication—more effect through the use of media—than most popular writers of "How to understand yourself" books who have the same basic objectives as those that guide Schulz. Schulz applies what we know about people and how to get people to look critically at themselves in non-threatening ways. He is clever and certainly an artist, but he also is an informed student of human behavior. We can see ourselves in his caricatures because Schulz has been watching us. His communication comes less out of his own head than out of what he sees in people.

Technologically, the exciting state of the art in graphics and print media today are a fruition of the potentialities of the Gutenberg era—and McLuhan reminds us that we are on our way out of the linear communication era just as it reaches fruition. We are headed pell-mell for the non-linear or mosaic period, keyed primarily by the electronic media and the potentialities for random information storage and recall made possible by the computer.

Several important items of communication hardware serve as bridges between these two eras, and those of us in the field of instructional systems are eagerly exploring their potentialities. Several of these devices are common enough today, but in the view of experts; they have not yet "hit their stride." The overhead transparency projector is a good example. It is a remarkably versatile device capable of being right at home in a linear or a mosaic communication situation. Similarly, the cassette audio recording system will be around for many years as the creativity of its users struggles to measure up to its broad potentialities.

Perhaps the most important device of all is the one that just arrived on the doorstep last year: electronic video recording. Eliminating many of the inherent complications of the video tape recorder, the EVR system makes possible mass uses that, in time, will lead us into whole new concepts of public libraries, of schools, of periodicals, and of communication itself.

Interesting as they are, the devices and machines are not what the communication revolution is all about. As usually is the case in human history, a device or system springs from the mind of the person as inquirer, as meddler, as challenger. But what it is all about is always more than the gadget: The revolution begins when the new discovery or invention brings about a change in the minds of people—when the old ways are re-examined, discarded, or modified in favor of a new concept of human needs and aspirations. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the revolution is in people's view of communication—their concepts of communication, and the way they relate communication to old needs, new needs and, in turn, their aspirations.

The theoretical footings of the upsurge of communication are both scientific and conceptual. (This distinction is an oversimplification; *scientific* refers to the basis in empirical findings from the behavioral aspects of the social sciences, and *conceptual* refers to the orderly development of theory through the construction and testing of relational models.) The primary scientific basis of contemporary knowledge in communication has come from studies of behavior change. What is important here is the shift of primary attention from the matter of attitudes to look at the more concrete matter of actual behavior. The research that is most

significantly unlocking the mysteries of human behavior looks at what people actually do in response to communicative or educational messages. It is becoming clear that merely *telling* is relatively ineffective; that facts alone rarely change people; that to influence what people *say* about what they are and what they do is a very different matter from actually changing what they *are* and what they do.

One of the most important conceptual bases of contemporary knowledge and practice in communication lies in the view of communication as a cyclic process. Today's view of effective communication—the conceptual model that is basic to most designs—is more than a one-way flow of information. The most apparent elements in a communication situation—the sender, the message, and the receiver, are augmented by a fourth major element, the feedback message. Feedback is information that allows for corrective change in a system. In communication, feedback is information from the receiver that indicates what he has heard in the message and what he has done with what he has heard. Words like *tell*, *inform*, *send*, *show*, and *broadcast* connote one-way information flow. By contrast, *communication* or *communicate* connote 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 his or her message. The objectives of communication are expressed in terms of changes in the receiver—in contrast with the typical implicit objectives of *telling*, which are more a matter of *exposing* the receiver.

## 2. An Era for Reducing Fantasy

To say that the Seventies can be an era for reducing fantasy is to politely say that the Seventies should be the decade to quit kidding ourselves. As we learn more about how people change, how people learn, and how to effect people in more predictable ways; we have a particular responsibility to decide how to use this knowledge and toward what goals to employ the technology that is made possible. If we are sincere about wanting to do God's business, now is the time to get more serious about exactly what it is that God wants to do. I like the way Director Ed Dayton says it, "Our job in research and planning is to find out what God is doing and find ways to help—to find the methods God wants to use and to use them." This is a large order, and sounds presumptive on first hearing. But, what is the alternative? To decide what God ought to be doing and to tell him about it? That's hardly less presumptive. Yet, as we look at the recent history of the evangelical cause we have to wonder about the possibility that this sort of bringing God in to endorse our cleverness is part of what has been going on. A systems analyst learns to spot the earmarks of "planning through opportunism." I respectfully suggest that the Holy Spirit has received unwanted credit for a lot of opportunism in Christian communication. Too frequently more attention has been given to the political expediency of getting a broadcasting license and to the financial opportunisms of getting all the right resources lined up (while we can get this land or that transmitter at ten cents on the dollar) than has been given to the basic question of what sort of changes in people we want the broadcasts to make. This sort of oversight is not necessarily deliberate—merely uniformed.

It is time now to quit kidding ourselves about the value of random one-way messages in the name of Christ. Without a listing of specific objectives regarding specific audiences, without the getting and using of significant and reliable feedback, without the continuous evaluation and re-shaping of messages, we place an unreasonable load on the mysticism of Christianity. We can appropriately ask and expect God to lead in our planning and our evaluating; we can rightly expect the Holy Spirit to work the message of the Gospel to the salvation of souls; but should



we so blithely and blindly stir around in things so basic and so vital as the development and extension of the body of Christ without employing all the know-how God in his providence has made available? We can settle for no less than the best of both technology and human know-how.

You can accept this easily enough until you discover that our technical resources have been better than our know-how in far too many cases. The know-how of contemporary communication hasn't been very well applied anywhere, even in the much-touted secular realm—except perhaps in advertising (where the big money is.) Certainly we haven't seen much substantial reform of education or of the uses of public media based on the new conceptual know-how. But it won't be long. Behavioral science is coming of age. The consequences in terms of new and powerful means to shape people's thinking are less a matter of soon than of now. Here is another moment in history when the fruits of science—of the systematic study of God's creation—lie within the grasp of the church to employ for his glory and for the building of his church. Is this what God is offering to us in the so-called “communication revolution?” If so, how do we claim it for him?

There are two roads we must travel simultaneously. We must inquire more diligently into the matter of the church in the world; there is absolutely no way to turn the power of scientifically designed communication to the glory of God without having a clear basis from which to derive the objectives of the communication.

But we must also be quickly about the matter of mastering the concepts and skills of the new technologies—and this refers to quite a different order of things than just the matter of how to build and manage a radio station, how to operate a television camera, or how to publish an attractive book. For sure, these are the aspects of the “revolution” that the layperson sees, but the more basic gains lie in matters of understanding and planning for changes in human behavior through communicative and instructional media.

In Paul's words, “I must exhort you to come to the depth of understanding of Christ and his church that will bring you to maintain the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”

A basic element in the contemporary understanding of communication is the function of perception. Expressed most simply, the proposition is this: What the hearer hears in the message is more important than what the sender thinks his message was. Like most solid theory, this sounds painfully like common sense. But remember, there is nothing so uncommon as applied common sense! Effective communicators are concerned about how they are heard; they know it does no good to argue with receivers about what they think they have heard. Re-shaping and re-sending the message is the solution.

Further, an effective communicator is concerned about the secondary messages—the accompanying messages that travel along as stowaways or excess baggage to weigh down, becloud or embarrass the primary message. Again, there is a commonsense adage that speaks to this point: “What you are speaks so loudly I cannot hear what you say.” A wrathful message about love, for example, may be perceived as contradictory confusion. A head bashing delivered in the name of law and order can be understood several ways. Supposedly supportive relationships of the missionary to the national church nurtured in an atmosphere of mistrust and within policies of patronizing separateness can seriously backfire. These are illustrations of perceptual problems that arise from inconsistency of the verbal message and the behavior of the sender.

There is yet another area of serious perceptual confusion in the church: The secondary messages that some well-meaning people intentionally attach to the message of the Gospel. These are usually a result of people deciding that the grace of God and the power of the Holy

Spirit in transforming lives are not quite enough; they decide to help out. They decide for themselves the particular political and social causes that God wants all good Christians to be for or against and wraps preachments about these issues into their communication as part and parcel of what God's redemptive work is all about.

Very likely, you can make your own applications of these propositions about communication to the realm of decision-making and responsibility where you function. We are talking about more than the role of radio, television, publications, and the other specific operations of communicating through public media. There is another level of meaning in my presentation to you. I am asking you to look at the communicating that you do. Each of us is communicating something or other about Christ; about the work he has done in each of our lives; about what he wants us to be and do; about how closely we are tuned to his message; about what he is trying to do through his church. In these areas, Christian institutions of education are communicating a powerful message. I must boldly ask you to consider the perceptions people make of the cause of Christ through the messages they see and hear about your Christian school. Are the messages coming through to them with singleness and clarity? Are there stowaways or excess baggage weighing them down? Are there contradictions? You certainly must recognize the dilemma you are in if you are trying to develop "independent thinking men and women able to stand for themselves on the basis of God's Word" and at the same time you must maintain a restricted academic and social environment in order to satisfy your constituency. Is your image of the



student you are trying to produce consistent with the image of Christ? In terms of contemporary communication, you *are* communicating some sort of Christ—as individuals and through your institutions.

One self-deception that must be reduced today is the matter of taking verbal responses at face value. A study that was done recently at Michigan State University under the direction of Robert Harmon of Youth for Christ International examined the verbal statements of values in nearly 40,000 teenage boys and girls nationwide, both church and unchurched. One of the depressing findings—depressing perhaps only in that it confirmed what most of us are afraid is happening—is that acceptance of doctrinal propositions about the reality of God and about the necessity of living according to God's standards rarely is reflected in the positions that the teenagers hold about moral and ethical standards of living. It looks as though we are reaping a generation or two of Christians who's Christianity is just "words deep." Communication theory reminds us that verbal acceptance or even acceptance of verbal propositions—creeds, if you please—is not necessarily linked to appropriate behavior change. We can "teach for the test" fairly well especially when the test—the objective of our communicating and our teaching—is verbal regurgitation. The Seventies can be the era in which we reduce this fantasy—this massive self-deception that weakens our institutions.

Closely linked to the matter of accepting verbal responses as adequate evidence of having communicated or having taught is the fantasy of substituting intentions for accomplishments. In virtually all of the institutional functions of the church, we can find elegant generalized statements of intent. These may be in the front page of a school's catalog, in the professor's introduction to the course, in the Sunday school's teachers' manual, or merely in the flowery pronouncements of the school's chief spokesman. It almost seems out-of-character for us to raise questions about this sort of statement of goals of the institution (since I find that these statements, no matter how vague, can become the starting place from which to spell out the specific objectives of a course, program, or institution.) But the question that must be raised deals with what role these statements of goals play. Far too often they are not used as a basis for evaluating the effectiveness and achievement of the institution. It is not enough to have good

intentions. Institutions are responsible for what they do—not just what they say they want to do. Here is where the matter of feedback transfers in from the field of communication. If an institution is seriously interested in achieving its objectives and serving its goals, it must get and use evaluative data. Even as an effective communication depends on re-shaping its message on the basis of feedback, the institution must engage in evaluation that can lead to alterations in the institution itself. This is rough terrain, of course, because there is nothing on God's green earth so prone to rigidity as an institution. So it takes commitment to goals—honest commitment—brave commitment—humble commitment—to really assure the achievement of those goals. Our Lord turned his face to Jerusalem; his intent was the cross. But his act of redemption was not complete until the objective of the cross was fulfilled. For us, pride so easily gets in the way. What professor really faces up to the fact that the test he administers is an indicator of how well he or she has taught? If educators became communicators, if pastors became communicators, if administrators became communicators, this could be a great era for reducing the fantasy that to want to do the right things is the same thing as accomplishing the right things.

3. An Era for the Church to Come Alive

This is the era for the church to come alive. Not only because it *can*, but because it *must*. The new technological resources of communication may, or may not, significantly affect the church. Recent history can make us skeptical: The church-related uses of radio and television so far don't seem very promising; the level of creativity associated with uses of tapes and filmstrips aren't exactly inspired; and the pie-in-the-sky schemes for winning souls at \$2 each ignore the research that shows mass media to be relatively ineffective in bringing people to a point of decision.

Nevertheless, the church isn't really behind; the rest of society is also still trying to figure out how to harness up the media.

After the flurry of excitement over the technological gadgetry of the mass media subsides, it may be interpersonal confrontation that emerges as the most powerful sort of communication. Scientific evidence seems to point in this direction—that winning people to a cause may be best accomplished through two separate steps: (a) A mass approach to raising questions, challenging the status quo, and creating an awareness of need, followed then by (b) an interpersonal interaction wherein feedback to the communicator can be instantaneous, and the warmth and depth of human encounter can be brought to bear.

In this two-step design, the use of mass media helps people see their needs; the awareness of such needs raises questions that then can be the focus of real communication. Some have suggested a “Brave New World” or a “1964” can be designed around this communication model. But it is likely that the church can come forward with a communication design more effective, more simple, and more readily achieved than that suggested by the novelists. I foresee the day when the discussion forum of old returns to be employed as a follow-up of inquiries and awareness generated through the mass media. Could this be what the assembly of believers—the church in congregation—is all about? Could we be about to re-discover the vitality of communication through conversation—today's lost art? If this should be the case, the church, through its local congregations with their suitable places for public dialogue and discourse, and with its traditions for public gatherings, could find itself reaching those people who have been sensitized and made curious through the mass media. Unlikely? Perhaps, but we must notice the emphasis on interaction with the questions expressed by inquirers during the ministry of Jesus and during the recorded activities of the early church. Could this sort of ministry account for the method or procedure used by Paul and Barnabas at Iconium when they “spoke in such a manner that a great multitude believed?” Speculation on these matters may be useless in itself; but the

church can come alive through patient inquiry into what the Holy Spirit wants to do in this age coupled with an energetic application of the theory and technology of communication to those objectives.

The essence of effective communication is summarized in the following three operations:

- Reduce interference and distraction by eliminating secondary messages.
- Specify your objectives and the target audiences, and then evaluate your communication in terms of achievement of these objectives.
- Get and use feedback (response) to reshape your message.

The race to find ways to employ new understandings and technologies of communication may well be decisive in these latter days. Effective communication is the key to people's minds. The church of Jesus Christ should not settle for second place.