



Objectives-Oriented Communication¹

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In the first presentation, the behavioral viewpoint was described in terms of its focus on the observable characteristics of people. The behavioral viewpoint as it relates to communication and teaching is the emphasis of this presentation.

Communication and education are similar processes. Both communication and education are professional fields in which specialized training is available. But neither field is truly a *discipline* in the sense of an organized field of scholarly inquiry that uses and produces basic information. Communication and education are fields in which behavioral science data are used, and essentially the same data are basic to both fields. But the inquiry techniques for educational research and for communication research are drawn from the basic disciplines of social science. The fields of communication and education are eclectic fields, drawing their basic information and procedures from basic sciences. (Medicine and engineering are similarly derivative fields.) Thus, if a person is to be trained as a specialist in education or in communication, beyond the level of the barely acceptable practitioner, grounding in one or more of the behavioral sciences is essential.

Since the fulfillments of the commissions of Christ to the church are highly dependent on communication and education, it is vital that there be within the church many effectively trained practitioners and specialists in education and communication.

My bias against using the word “Christian” as an adjective makes no exception of the term “Christian education.” I believe that the processes of education and communication are so basic to the whole activity of the church that it seems a mistake to use the label “Christian education” to isolate some of the most vital content of theological education; the main consequence seems to be that pastoral students are thus exempted from learning it. In any case, the data from behavioral science that constitutes the substantial basis for practice in education and communication *must* be drawn into the programs of education for church leadership and discipleship. Communicating Christ is every Christian’s business. Training for effective communication is available; we must be diligent about bringing it into the realm of education of the church.

I shall resist the temptation to digress into one of my favorite witch-hunts, namely the failure of the field of so-called “Christian education” to lead the church in North America beyond the relatively low-value indoctrination modes of training that characterize so much of the silly stuff that is passed off as education in your church and mine. Instead, we will consider the problem of designing effective communication and what is basic to that problem—the objectives-orientation of communication.

Carelessly used, the word *communication* refers to the process of transferring information from one point to another. The over-simplification of this common definition conceals dozens of difficulties. Purposeful communication is more than a one-way transmission; communication is *interaction*. Purposeful communication is essentially the same process as education: the presentation of

¹ Presentation for the Bueermann-Champion Lectureship, 1971. Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, OR. Series Title: Creative Christian Communication. (Eight sessions indicated; five documents exist in the Archive.)

information in a carefully designed form to an appropriate audience through a useful medium in order to produce change. Notice how the definition ends—to produce change. Purposeful communication is more than *telling*, telling may or may not produce change. Until change results, we haven't gotten through—we haven't communicated.

Contemporary thought in education sees learning in terms of behavior change. The major consequence of this view is a rejection of any doctrinaire teaching that seeks 'lip-service' alone. What a person truly knows is measured in terms of the difference it makes in the daily decision-making of his or her life. There is, of course, a highly pragmatic overtone here: what has been truly learned is what the individual can put to work in daily life. Pragmatism or not, this behavioral definition of learning helps to put the emphasis on dynamic application of information. Sterile acquiescence or nodding and shallow acceptance cannot rightly be called learning. Does this view threaten the church? We should devoutly hope not. The Gospel's power is reflected in its capacity to change people's hearts (inner processes) so that what flows from the inner motivations will be observably different.

The Centrality of Communication in the Church

Until you look closely at the matter, communication can be viewed as one of the desirable universals. Although it might seem that *everybody* would want to communicate effectively, the facts don't follow. When selfish purposes rule, deception and confusion seem to be preferable to openness, clarity, and honesty. But on behalf of an honest 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 is actively involved in outgoing processes of communication. In fact, the communication implicit in Christianity is purposeful and objectives-oriented. It isn't enough to stand on a street corner with a tract or a sign. It isn't enough to saturate the airwaves. The issue is communication: what are people hearing and what are they doing with what they hear?

In virtually all of the institutional functions of the church there are elegant generalized statements of intent: These are in the front page of a church's constitution, in a Bible college catalog, in the professor's introduction to the course, in the Sunday school teachers' manual, and in the flowery pronouncements of the church's spokesperson.

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 church. It is not enough to have good intentions. If no evaluation is made to determine the extent to which the goals are being accomplished, the sham can get pretty deep. What we *want* to do is no alibi for what we are actually doing. Responsible institutions make clear statements of their intentions *and* careful assessments of their accomplishments. What about the church?

"You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" may easily be the all-time prize-winner among misused aphorisms. The truth is hard to discern—and harder to share, virtually powerless against any really appealing alternative, and often poorly translated into personal meaning for those we most want to help.

All Christians are in the business of communication. At the very least, we are walking, talking, "audio-visual materials" of a complex, informal system communicating what Jesus Christ means in today's terms. We have too often been content to be part of a "Truth without Consequences" program. Consider those who are watching you. Perhaps they get the message about Christ as truth—but what message do they get about freedom? In what sense has the truth made you free? How do you show it? Has Christ *really* released you from the bondage of sin? Has he really given you *abundant* life? What are the consequences of truth for you?

The Need for Know-how

Modern men and women have at their fingertips powerful new know-how for influencing others. The race to find ways to employ new understandings and technologies of communication may well be decisive in the development of the human condition in these latter days. Effective communication of truth is the key to the minds of men and women. The church of Jesus Christ should not settle for second place.

It is now time 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 reshaping 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 blithely and blindly stir around in things so basic and so vital as the development and expansion of the body of Christ? No. We are obliged to employ 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.

Tell, inform, send, show, and broadcast connote one-way information flow. By contrast, *communicate* connotes a two-way flow of information. The objectives of communication are expressed in terms of changes in the receiver—in contrast with the objectives of *telling*, which are more a matter of *exposing* the receiver.

Applying Communication Theory

Among the many principles that can be drawn from communication theory are two that have a particular usefulness for the church. The first of these is concerned with systematic designing and redesigning of messages. As mentioned earlier, effective communication involves a two-way flow of information. Well-designed communication is sometimes referred to as a “loop” or a “cycle.” The reference is to the loop or cycle completed by information returned to the sender as *feedback* from the listener. (As the term is used in scientific and engineering senses, *feedback* is a matter of information that will be used to alter a message, signal, or procedure.) Some may use the word “feedback” interchangeably with “reaction,” but in communication theory, the word has a more specific meaning. In fact, reaction that *isn't* used by the communicator doesn't qualify as feedback.

Perception is an essential part of communication. What the hearer hears in the message is more important than what the sender thinks the message was. Like most solid theory, this sounds painfully like common sense. Effective communicators are concerned about how they are heard; they know it does no good to argue with the receivers about what they think they have heard. Reshaping and resending the message is the solution.

Further, an effective communicator tries to minimize the secondary messages—the accompanying messages that travel along as stowaways or excess baggage to weigh down, becloud, or embarrass the primary message. Again, the common-sense adage 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. Pastoral back patting interspersed by back biting is apt to be seen as hypocritical. These are illustrations of perceptual problems that arise from inconsistency of the verbal message and the behavior of the sender.

Following is a generalized diagram of the cycle or loop of communication. This model of communication is not only descriptive of what does happen in an effective communication

relationship, but it is also useful prescriptively as an aid for planning. It is a behavioral model, drawn from cybernetics and the application of perceptual theory. (See Figure 2.)

To begin the process, the sender determines what the message will be. The message is sent. The receiver builds a perception of the part of the message that he or she receives. But perception is brought *to* the message from one's own experiences—which may or may not be similar to those of the sender. Thus, the message is now not what the sender thought she or he sent! At that point, the probability is great that significant misunderstanding has occurred. The receiver can be encouraged to take the next step: to send a message back to the sender that will indicate what has been heard. Such a message, if *used* by the original sender, constitutes the completion of the cycle or loop. But again, the *meaning* brought to the feedback message comes from the hearer's perceptions. Thus, there is a continuing probability of misunderstanding. As messages are recycled, they can be systematically reshaped in order to reduce the perceived differences and increase the effectiveness of the communication.

Refining the form and substance of a message is a vital part of the modern communication process. The objective is to assure that form and substance (medium and message) are compatible and supportive, and to increase the likelihood of the message's resulting in the planned consequence. Here is where *feedback* becomes indispensable. Without reliable information about the consequences of previous efforts, one is left only to imagination and intuition for cues about needed improvement. Improvement of any recurring operation involving people is based on a sort of cyclic process of planning, execution, getting feedback, re-planning, executing, and so on. It is essential to take account of the known consequences (both good and bad) of previous communication in order to improve the design of subsequent communication.

In mass communications not involving sales of an identifiable product getting useful feedback is very difficult. Wouldn't it be great if broadcasters could get into the field and sit down with groups of their listeners during a delayed transmission? Or better yet, take a tape player and go through a sample broadcast with a representative group of those they are trying to reach—stopping the tape periodically to get some feedback on what the listeners are actually hearing and thinking. "Sesame

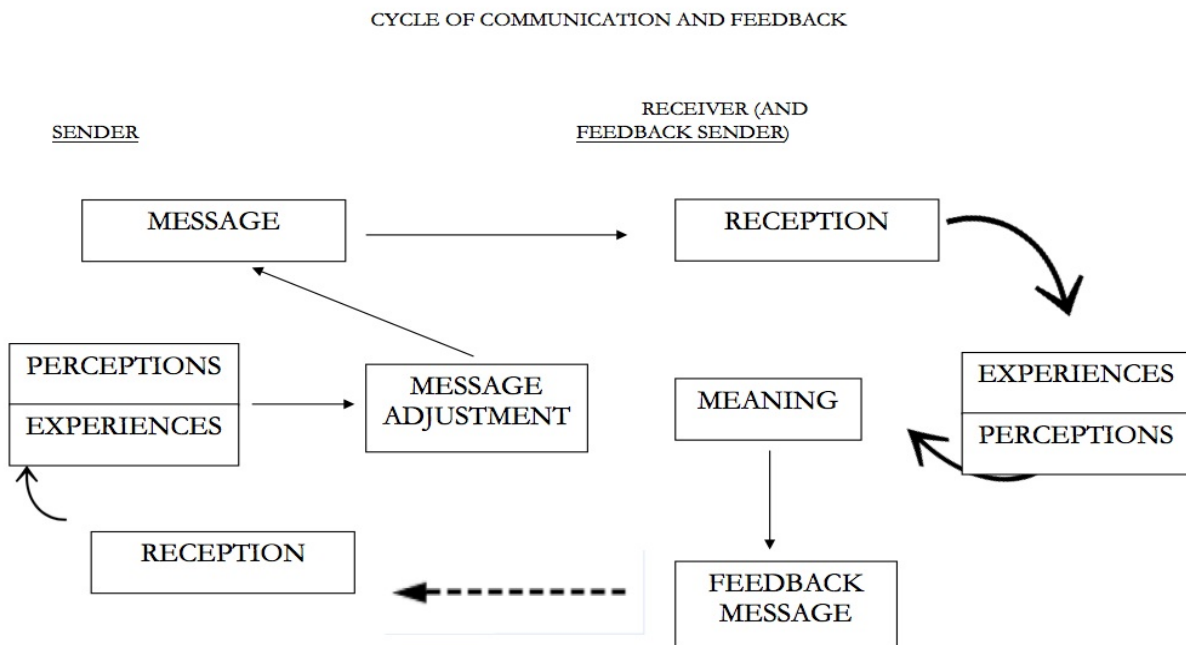


Figure 2. Feedback as the Completion of the Communication Cycle

Street” is an example of a program which is elaborately tested and recycled before broadcasting.

One widely utilized form of feedback is the voluntary correspondence from readers or listeners. The distinction between regular supporters and newly affected people should be carefully observed. Supporters are usually happiest when given “more of the same”—much like a church congregation—but for *real* feedback on what nuances of message and approach are really meeting unmet needs, watch the mail from first-timers. Perhaps the economic structure of the faith-supported ministry system makes us overly sensitive (it might be more honest to say *necessarily* sensitive) to the wrong audiences.

The value of this model is not reserved to the field of mass communication. You can use this model to begin today to improve the effectiveness of your interpersonal communication. The essence of the procedure is to get and use feedback, and when you are in the role of *receiver* of a message be willing to *give* feedback. It is natural enough to ask, “Do you understand?” or a more effective equivalent, “Tell me what this idea means to you,” but it takes practice to learn to initiate feedback yourself. Try this phrase: “Let me tell you what I hear you saying . . .”

The second practical application of communication theory to the work of the church is more restricted to its outreach or mass communication efforts. But please be aware that there is no such thing as “winning the masses for Christ;” the old way is still the new way—*one by one*.

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 men and women to a cause may best be accomplished through two separate steps:

1. A mass approach to raising questions, challenging the status quo, and creating an awareness of need.
2. An interpersonal interaction where 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 to see their needs; the awareness of such needs raises questions that then can be the focus of real communication.

Perhaps the day will come when the “discussion forum” of old will return, 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. Notice the emphasis on conversational interaction in Jesus’ ministry. Notice the questions expressed by the inquiring who came to him. Notice the dialogues in Acts that give us a picture of the early church. Could this sort of conversational ministry account for the 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.



At a recent convention of the Association for Accreditation of Bible Colleges, I was invited to speak about communication. After I had engaged in an embarrassing exposé of the futility of one-way broadcasting and an unfair attack on typical homiletics courses (any attack on nineteenth century homiletics is unfair—the defense is so weak) a dear old brother stood up to me. “You apparently don’t believe the Bible. The Bible says that ‘It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe’.”

I understood Elizabethan English well enough to see his point. I had been pleading for objectives-oriented communication, arguing for a feedback linkage, and a view of communication as a loop. It had upset this fellow when I complained that preaching is too often insensitive, one-way telling. But I wasn't sure what to do with his counter-attack, because his proof text seemed to argue that virtually any foolish thing said from the pulpit in the right spirit would somehow be magically made effective.

As in all cases when behavioral science and the Bible seem to be in conflict, it pays to re-examine *both*, particularly searching out those premises and preconceptions that inhibit accurate and appropriate use of the data. When I shared this problem with one of my closest friends, whose gifts in theological analysis are marvelous to behold, he suggested that we track down the function of proclamation. What an experience! We found more than we could have hoped for.

Here are a few highlights from the investigation. The proof text offered in defense of classical preaching (I Corinthians 1:21) uses *kerygma*, which is more properly translated the *message* (see NAS.) Paul within a few paragraphs of this text says that his *preaching* (*kerygma*) was “*not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*” Paul, here and elsewhere emphasizes the message itself and then leads us to conclude that he would not stop with simply making speeches about the Gospel, but would go so far as to use any, and all, procedures to see that the message was made thoroughly (perceptually) meaningful. “Preaching the Gospel” often involves the *katangelo* of “announce,” “proclaim,” and “show forth.” In this treatise on the observance of the Lord's Supper sent by Paul to the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 11:26,) observance of the ordinance is said to proclaim or announce the redemptive work of Christ. Robertson and Plummer refer to the Lord's Supper as “an *acted sermon.*”² Thus, there is Scriptural precedent for a comprehensive view of the communications of proclamation. And this comprehensive view rather sharply puts to rest the assertion that effective preaching is merely a matter of *telling*.

Exactly what techniques of communication were used by Jesus and by the Apostles we can only speculate. Theirs was a culture of word pictures and symbolic verbal illustrations. Christ used parables and analogies probably because his followers and the onlookers were perceptually and pedagogically attuned to these aids to learning. He used a graphic device only once, and even then we must guess as to whether he wrote or sketched on it. But today's learners, at least in the western cultures, are strongly pictorially and graphically oriented. Words—in the oral tradition of eloquence in the open air—are comparatively less effective. We must be careful not to let musty traditions, lazy habits, and misuse of the Bible dissuade us from learning to see more potent procedures of communication.

Behavioral science is coming of age. The consequences in terms of new and powerful means to shape thought are less a matter of *soon* than of *now*. Just as the era of the physical sciences was introduced by the Industrial Revolution, so the era of the social and behavioral sciences is heralded by the communication revolution. We live in one of the great moments of 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 “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 this matter of the church in the world. (There is 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.) And we must also be quickly about the matter of mastering the concepts and

² Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer. *1 Corinthians*. In The International Critical Commentary Series. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2nd edition, 1956.

skills of the new technologies. This latter demands 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.

When God’s truths are concerned, we must assume that the overseeing ministry of the Holy Spirit is capable of convicting the conscience in mysterious ways. In one sense, we take this for granted, in that we expect God to work his will; yet in the sense that God has elected to work his will through those of His choosing, we must do all that we can to assure clarity of meaning and import to the truth as we pass it on. *We* have the task of pointing out its relevance to today’s problems and today’s human needs.

We are in the church.

We are the church.

We have a partnership with Jesus Christ—and with each other.