Communicating JESUS' WAY

Revised Edition

Charles H. Kraft

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Communicating Jesus' Way

Charles H. Kraft

William Carey Library
Pasadena, California

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ISBN 0-87808-773-7

Published by William Carey Library P.O. Box 40129 Pasadena, CA 91114

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kraft, Charles H.

Communicating Jesus' way / Charles H. Kraft.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-87808-773-7 (alk. paper)

1. Communication--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Jesus Christ--Teaching methods. I. Title.

BV4319 .K725 1998 261.5'2--dc21

98-017844

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FOREWORD

It has been gratifying to see how well my little volume entitled Communicating the Gospel God's Way has been received. It has gone through five printings with William Carey Library in addition to its original publication in the Ashland Theological Bulletin for 1979.

Some have even told me they felt that book to be among the very few books on communication that communicates effectively. It is certainly among the few that attempt to integrate communication theory with an understanding of how God seeks to communicate. It has served, then, both as a manual for Christian communicators and a brief introduction to the theology of communication.

That volume was, however, put out rather hurriedly and has always seemed to me to contain less than it should. So, for some time I have planned to revise and enlarge it. The present volume is that revision and enlargement. Though it is my desire to keep the book short, I have added three chapters (1, 5 and 6) to the original four. These chapters flesh out what I felt to be lacking in the original treatment.

The original book attempted to deal with the way Jesus communicated with humans by relating closely with us. However, it neglected his relationship with the Father at the other end of the "bridge" between God and humans. Chapter 1 is completely new and attempts to rectify that lack by dealing with the requirement that those who communicate God's messages should, like Jesus, be in intimate relationship with God the Source.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are revisions of chapters 1-3 of Communicating the Gospel God's Way. I have gone over these chapters

thoroughly and made many minor and several substantial changes in them. Chapter 2 presents Jesus as the demonstration of God at the human end of the communicational bridge. Chapter 3 discusses how we are to go about following his example. And chapter 4 focuses on those who receive God's and our messages.

The original volume did not deal directly with the topic that is likely to cause the most need for revision in Christian communication—the subject of meaning. Chapter 5 attempts to fill that gap. Though that chapter is newly joined with the other chapters of this book, a previous version of it appeared as chapter 5 in Communication Theory for Christian Witness (Orbis, 1991).

Chapter 6, too, is taken from Communication Theory. It is a revision of chapter 2 of that book and focuses on ten of the false understandings of various aspects of communication that are abroad in the Christian community. Chapter 7, then, is a slightly revised version of the original chapter 4 in Communicating the Gospel God's Way. It deals with the strengths and weaknesses of monolog, dialog and life involvement communication. As this book goes forth, I bless you its readers in the Name of Jesus with success in being more like our Lord in the ways in which you handle and attempt to communicate his messages. May the Lord who said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21) empower these words, though presented feebly in writing, to fulfill the purposes for which He led me to write them.

South Pasadena, California February 1998

Chapter One

INTIMACY WITH GOD THE FATHER

As one who specializes in the communication of Christianity from society to society I am increasingly fascinated by what the Bible shows us concerning how God communicated. I am, of course convinced that God knew what he was doing communicationally. Since communication is so important in getting God's message across to humans, I am surprised that very few people seem to have studied just how he carried out his communicational activity.

For generations, we who seek to communicate God's Word have looked to the Bible for our *message*. I am afraid, though, that we have seldom looked to the Bible for our *method*. I have become personally convinced that the inspiration of the Bible extends both to message and to method. My aim in this book, therefore, is to elucidate a scriptural method for getting God's message across. And I dare to call that method "God's Model for Communication."

Though I will talk about what I believe to be a method of approach that we see from cover to cover in the Bible, it will be the example of Jesus that will be in primary focus. God, of course, has communicated with humans through others (Heb 1:1). But Jesus was his method par excellence (Heb 1:2)—the best communicational bridge God ever produced.

Communication involves a gap and a bridge. A communicational gap always exists between beings who seek to interact with one another, whether we are focusing on the interactions of humans with humans or of those between God and humans. To cross such a gap, a communicational bridge is needed. Those who specialize in communication theory study how communicational bridges are built

and how to cross them. I believe the insight of those who study such gaps and bridges needs to be applied to our understanding of how God gets his messages across to humans. That is where this book starts.

We begin our study of God's communicational activity with the recognition that bridges have two ends. There is the source end and the receptor end. And the bridge must be connected well at both ends. I once saw a bridge that was constructed half way across a wide river. It sat that way for nearly forty years before somebody figured out how to connect it on the other side of the river. For forty years, then, the half-way bridge sat useless, even though it was well connected at one end.

The first point to recognize concerning God's approach to communication is, therefore, that the would-be communicator must be connected well at both ends. Though the remainder of this book will seek to analyze and apply Jesus' example at the receptor end of the bridge, it is crucial that Christian communicators imitate his example at the other end of the bridge as well.

Jesus, the Son

Our God is a communicating God. Though he has employed many approaches to interacting with his creatures, he has never ceased to send messages to us. Not until Jesus came, however, did he unveil his ultimate method of communication—his Son (Heb 1:2). his supreme choice of method is the One he calls his Son.

A son is a family member. He exists in a relationship with his parents that cannot be dissolved—a relationship that exists whether or not the son pleases the father. He was brought up in the father's home and learned quite unconsciously to behave like his father. For genetic reasons, then, a son looks like his father and because of their close contact in the home, he acts like his father.

But even a father-son relationship may deteriorate if it is not cared for. Fathers who do not spend time with their sons lose contact with them. Such sons grow away from their fathers rather than more

like them. So do sons who refuse to listen to and obey their fathers. Such sons are called unfaithful.

This is what happened to the people of Israel. They wandered away from their Father. The first Adam (1 Cor 15:45–47) failed the faithfulness test. And, though Abraham and his descendants were often faithful, they kept turning their backs on their Father and leaving Him. In Jeremiah 3:19–20, then, God laments:

Israel, I wanted to accept you as my son and give you a delightful land, the most beautiful land in all the world. I wanted you to call me father and never again turn away from me. But like an unfaithful wife, you have not been faithful to me.

Jesus' relationship with his Father was, however, not like that. He, the second Adam, was a faithful Son, one who spent time with his Father. By inheritance he was "the exact likeness of God's own being" (Heb 1:3) while by association he came to reflect "the brightness of God's glory" (Heb 1:3).

In becoming a man, Jesus agreed with God the Father not to use his divine attributes (Phil 2:6–8). As the second Adam, then, he earned his sonship as a human. He was tested (Heb 4:15), taught obedience (Heb 5:8) and made perfect (Heb 2:10) as a human son. He did not fail the faithfulness test as the first Adam had. His example, not that of the first Adam, is the one to follow.

Jesus' Intimacy with the Father

Jesus carefully established and maintained intimacy with his Father. For proper sonship requires intimacy. But intimacy takes work. So Jesus worked at maintaining intimacy with the Father. Though as a human, he was separated from the Father by the vast communication gap that exists between God and humans, Jesus regularly took time from his ordinary duties to go away and be alone with his Father. It was his habit to "go away to lonely places, where he prayed" (Lk 5:16; see also 6:12, 9:18, 9:28; 11:1; 22:41).

What was Jesus doing during these times with the Father? Was he constantly asking him for things as we often do when we pray?

Or was the time spent more relationally, discussing the events of the previous day and the plans for the next? Might much of the time have been spent simply relaxing in the Father's arms? Whatever they did, we can be sure that their relationship was being cultivated and their intimacy maintained. It was the closeness at the "God end" of the bridge that was being tended to so that the ministry at the other end of the bridge would be on track.

Jesus' relationship with the Father was one of utter dependence. He said, "the Son can do nothing on his own; he does only what he sees his Father doing" (Jn 5:19). He lived his life and conducted his ministry totally under the Father's authority, not allowing himself to do anything on his own authority (Jn 5:30). He who had the right to be equal with God the Father took the position of a slave under the authority of the Father (Phil 2:7). Having agreed with the Father to not use his inherent divine powers, he did no miracles until the Holy Spirit came upon him at his baptism (Lk 3:21–2). And from then on, he did what he did (whether or not we call it "miraculous") under the power of the Holy Spirit.

He listened carefully to what the Father communicated to him, telling only what he heard from the Father (Jn 8:26), saying only what the Father instructed him to say (Jn 8:28, 38) and teaching only what comes from God (Jn 7:16). He obediently worked the Father's works (Jn 5:17), did what he saw the Father doing (Jn 5:19–20), demonstrating what God is like through his deeds (Jn 10:37–8; 14:11) and in doing these things always pleased the Father (Jn 8:29).

We Need the Same Intimacy

In all of this, then, Jesus modeled for us what our relationship with the Father should look like. For at the God end of the bridge we, like Jesus, are to receive our instructions and the authority to do what God wants us to do from our intimacy with God the Father. The power, then, to carry out what God instructs us to do comes to us, as it did to Jesus, from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus chose twelve, first to "be with him," then to go out to proclaim the gospel with the authority to do mighty works (Mk 3:14—

15), even to the point of doing what Jesus himself did and more (Jn 14:12). The first order of business was to develop an intimate relationship with the source of their authority. When Jesus left them, then, he told them to wait until the Holy Spirit came upon them to empower them (Lk 24:49; Ac 1:4) for the tasks God leads them into. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us, we are to go out into all the world to witness—to communicate (Ac 1:8).

Effectiveness in doing the works of Jesus depends upon our closeness to him. And this is true whether the works are "signs and wonders" or the work of communicating as he communicated. The messages we carry across the communication bridge from God to humans can only be from God if we, the communicators, are connected to God and receiving the messages from him.

The appropriate starting place for communicating in God's way, then, is an intimate, dependent, listening and obeying relationship with God. How does this happen?

Five Types of Prayer

When we come into God's presence, we say we are praying. But the term "prayer" is often used to label several different types of things. There are at least six of these. Three of them, "intimacy," gratitude and confession prayer, connect us at the God end of the bridge. One, asking prayer, gives us something to carry across the bridge. Intercessory and authority praying, then, fight the battle at the human end of the bridge.

1. I have come to believe that the most important type of prayer is what I will term intimacy or relaxing prayer. This is when we simply invite God to come and we relax in his presence. As I pointed out above, I think this is the kind of prayer Jesus often engaged in when he spent the night in prayer.

I believe Jesus discerned that the disciples needed this kind of relaxation in the presence of God when he washed their feet (Jn 13:1-17). Though it is difficult for us to understand why the Creator would serve the creature as Jesus did in this event, perhaps we, like Peter, need to learn to accept such ministry if we are to

continue to be his disciples (Jn 13:8). For Jesus at another time said, even he "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mt 20:28).

We often spend the whole of our prayer time talking to God, with little or none of it spent listening. A pastor friend of mine pictures the average prayer as a telephone conversation where one person talks and talks and then, before the other can say anything, hangs up the phone. When we relax in God's presence we give him opportunity to express himself to us.

Sometimes I find Jesus coming to me in a picture—when I ask him to. I usually see him hugging me or putting his arm around my shoulder. Sometimes we simply walk together and enjoy each other's presence. He makes me feel loved and cared for, just as he did with Peter when he ministered to him. He treats me as his dear child (1 Jn 3:1). I am restored and refreshed as David was in Psalm 23.

Sometimes God allows me to simply feel his presence. When I ask him to come, he often brings what I call a "sweet heaviness" and a holy hush. Sometimes this is so obvious that any noise or movement seems to be an intrusion. Sometimes there is little or no feeling, just the knowledge that when we ask God to come, he comes.

I experience this kind of prayer accompanied by music in many worship settings. In this case we sing to God and he responds by allowing us to feel the "sweet heaviness" I mentioned above. Ordinary hymn singing usually doesn't bring this kind of intimacy to me. Sustained singing of contemporary worship music, music in which I express my love and commitment to God, usually with my eyes closed, however, frequently seems to transport me right into God's throne room.

In intimacy prayer we connect tightly with God, the Source of all we seek to carry across the bridge to those on the other side of the gap. This kind of prayer is crucial for Jesus-like communication. It is probably this kind of prayer that Paul had in mind when he said, "pray at all times" ("without ceasing" KJV) (1 Thes 5:17).

2. The second type of prayer may be labeled gratitude prayer. Paul commands this kind of prayer in the verse following that quoted above saying, "be thankful in all circumstances" (1 Thes

5:18). Gratefulness to God is to be our attitude at all times, no matter what happens.

Most of what happens in life can be classified as either good or neutral. We are, of course, to constantly and openly recognize that God is the author of all that is not evil. As Paul said at Lystra, God has always given evidence of his existence by the good things he does: he gives you rain from heaven and crops at the right times; he gives you food and fills your hearts with happiness (Ac 14:17).

But even when things don't seem good, "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him" (Rom 8:28). We are, then, to express our gratefulness even when things look dark. Not that we are to thank God for everything that happens. We are to praise him in everything, not for everything. For, whether or not we are aware of it, his care for us is a constant fact of our lives.

When things go well, God is the author. So we thank him. When circumstances happen that we cannot understand, God is behind the scenes ready to work with us for good. So we thank him. And even when the enemy attacks us, God sets the limits (Job 1:12; 2:6). So we thank him.

In song as well as silently and in word, we are to praise him. Our attitude is to be the same as David's who, whether he found himself in easy or difficult circumstances, said things like: "I will always thank the Lord; I will never stop praising him" (Ps 34:1). Gratitude prayer is an important part of the life of anyone who is close to God.

3. Confession prayer, then, is used to make clean the vessel that crosses the bridge. In it we acknowledge our inadequacies and our tendency to disobey and break faith with our Lord. In keeping with 1 John 1:9 we confess our sins and accept God's pardon.

Though our sinfulness is a fact and must be continually recognized and confessed, we are not to dwell on our failings. Instead, we are to focus on the God who, defying all logic, lovingly accepts, forgives and welcomes us into his presence (Rom 5:6–11). He provided for such acceptance long before we recognized our need for it and offered it to us freely, purely on the basis of our humble

faith-response to him. The fact that such grace is offered to all humankind, then, becomes an important part of the message to be carried across the bridge to others.

4. The most common kind of prayer is what I'll call asking prayer. This is the simple asking God for things that we all know how to do so well. In asking prayer we stand at one or the other end of the bridge asking our Father either to send something across to us or to give us something to take across to others.

Though in ourselves we have no rights with God, his invitation to intimacy or the basis of our faith-relationship with him carries with it the permission to come boldly into his presence (Heb 4:16), knowing that we will be well-received there. Furthermore, Jesus invites us to "ask and you will receive, so that your happiness may be complete" (Jn 16:24).

An intimate relationship with God the Father means, then, that we can make requests as well as relax and worship, give thanks and praise.

5. That intimacy means, though, that we are a part of Jesus' army. As those who belong to his Kingdom we get to fight against the enemy in intercessory prayer. There are those who need help on the human end of the bridge whose needs we are to bring to God. We thus join God in applying his power to release those for whom we intercede from whatever power the evil one has leveled against them.

We are to intercede for everyone (1 Tim 2:1; Eph 6:18), being used thereby in some mysterious way to enable God to carry out his will with them. Among the multitude of examples of intercession in Scripture are Abraham's intercession for Sodom (Gen 18:23–32), Moses' intercessions for Pharaoh (Ex 8:12, 30–31; 9:33; 10:18) and for the Israelites (Ex 32:11–13, 31–2; 34:9; Num 11:11–15; 14:13–19; 21:7; Deut 9:18–20; 10:10), Jesus' intercession for Peter (Lk 22:32), for the disciples (Jn 17:9–19) and for all who would come to faith in him (Jn 17:20–23) and Paul's intercessions for the people he ministered to (Rom 1:9–10; Eph 1:16–19; 3:14–19; Col 1:9).

Paul closely connects intercessory prayer with the use of the armor God gives us to fight against the Devil (Eph 6:18–19). It is to

be used on every occasion according to the leading of the Holy Spirit (Eph 6:18).

6. At the human end of the bridge, then, we are to engage in the same kind of authoritative witness that Jesus demonstrated. This involves what I'll call authoritative prayer. Technically, I don't think we should call this activity prayer. For it is not the kind of activity in which we speak to God. It is, rather, speaking on behalf of God against those things that he leads us to speak against.

Like Jesus did, then, we speak authoritatively against demons and diseases (Lk 9:1). For Jesus gave his disciples authority and power over such beings and entities, commanding them to preach and heal (Lk 9:2) and then to teach their disciples all that he taught them (Mt 28:20).

Jesus did not pray in any of the above senses when he ministered to people. He took authority and commanded the result to happen on the basis of his mandate from the Father to demonstrate what he is like (Jn 14:9). Jesus used his authority and power to show the Father's love and promised that we would do the same (Jn 14:12).

It is this authoritative demonstration of God the Father, issuing from Jesus' intimacy with and obedience to him that provides the basis for the incarnational witness that is the subject of the chapters that follow. Jesus was tightly connected to God at one end of the bridge and to humans at the other. So must we be if we are to do the works of God in his way.

	a.	

Chapter Two

JESUS' DEMONSTRATION OF GOD AT THE HUMAN END OF THE BRIDGE

One of the most important principles of interpersonal communication is that the person who brings the message is a major component of the message he/she brings. In interacting with others we find over and over again that our interpretation of what those others communicate is firmly based on who those persons are.

God knew the truth of this communication principle. In order to get his ultimate message across the bridge, then, he became that message. In John 1:1 we are told "At the beginning God expressed himself" (Phillips). Then, in John 1:14, the author states that that expression of God "became a human being and lived among us." Incarnation thus becomes God's ultimate means of communication at the human end of the bridge.

Now the problem I want to raise is: How can we follow God's example in our efforts to communicate his Good News? God has, of course, communicated very effectively. He has, furthermore, chosen to use us in his present-day communicational activities. How then can we learn to involve ourselves in his work in his way? This is the subject of what follows.

A study of the Scriptures from a communicational point of view suggests that God employs ordinary human communication principles in his efforts to get his messages across. Plus one thing, the power of the Holy Spirit. Even with the Holy Spirit operating, however, it does not look as though God overruled the humanity of the people he worked with in the Scriptures to make them into commu-

nicational robots. Rather, he appears to have led them as they participated with him.

If this is true, we should be able through study of the Bible from a communicational perspective to gain insight into how God wants us to communicate his messages. Specifically, we can discover how Jesus communicated by studying his example and analyzing it according to what we think we know about effective communication. We can then seek to follow his communicational approach to bringing God's messages across the bridge.

A helpful way of looking at our aim is to use a term that is increasingly coming into prominence in Bible translation theory. This term is "dynamic equivalence." A dynamic equivalence Bible translation is a translation that seeks to attain as nearly as possible the kind of communicational impact on today's hearers that the original Scriptures had on the original hearers. Such translations as Phillips, Good News for Modern Man, and Living Bible have often had such an impact in contemporary English.

Our aim is to communicate in a way that has the same kind of impact as God's communicational activity portrayed in the Scriptures. To the extent that we are able to do that, we are being dynamically equivalent to the Scriptures in our communicational activity. If you can imagine yourself communicating the messages that God gives you as effectively as the above translations communicate the Scriptural message, you will have a glimpse of what I am suggesting should be the goal of Christian communication.

Preliminary Observations Concerning God and His Communicative Activity

The first thing I would like to deal with in this regard is to suggest seven preliminary observations concerning God's communication. I believe that these observations apply to all of Scripture, but preeminently to the way Jesus communicated. I also believe that if we seek to be scriptural in our communicative activity, we will seek to imitate God in each of these areas.

1. In the first place, I would like to suggest that God seeks to communicate, not simply to impress people. We have all had the experience of sitting in church and hearing a soloist or an organist or even a preacher show off in front of us. We may have expected that they were going to be primarily concerned with getting their message across but, as they got into their performances, we began to realize that their primary concern (often unconscious) was to impress us. They were of course communicating something, but that communication had more to do with their own ability than with anything they were talking, singing, or playing about. They seemed to be more interested in impressing people than in communicating with people.

A basic principle of communication that is involved in such a situation is that when a vehicle of communication calls attention to itself, the message is lost. If, therefore, in a situation such as preaching, singing, or organ playing, we become more aware of the performer's ability to perform than of the message he/she is seeking to get across, the situation becomes a performance rather than a communication.

What I'm suggesting is that God *communicates*, not simply performs. Throughout the Bible he uses language that does not call attention to itself. He uses people who do not call attention to themselves. In fact, when, as in the case of Saul these people begin to call attention to themselves, they become unfit for God's service. Likewise with respect to Bible translation, if the beauty or some other characteristic of the language calls attention to itself, it obscures the message. The Scriptures in the original languages are fairly unimpressive from a literary point of view. Jesus, when he walked the earth was also, apparently, fairly unimpressive personally. But his message had great impact.

2. Secondly, God wants to be *understood* not simply admired. God, of course, is impressive. He is, of course, to be admired. But there is a sense in which if we focus on merely admiring God, his ultimate purpose in interacting with human beings is thwarted. Some would seem to give the impression that God has an enormous ego that demands that people sit around admiring him at all times. This seems to be the way in which many define worship. Without

denying the value for us of contemplating God's greatness and of worshipping Him, however, I would like to suggest that his greater desire is that we understand and obey Him. Though not infrequently what God says and does is difficult for us to understand, God's ultimate purpose

is not "to mystify the truth" but to reveal it, not to hide verities behind historical accounts, but to face man with the truth in any and all literary forms which they can understand (Nida 1990:29).

As pointed out above it is to enable people to understand that God used human, rather than divine language. It is to enhance understanding that He took on human shape, both in the incarnation and in the Old Testament theophanies (e.g., Gen 18, Dan 3:25). God's desire was to be understood when he used dreams to reach those who believed in dreams and parables to reach those who had become accustomed to being taught through parables. On occasion God communicates through a spectacle (e.g., 1 Ki 19:11 and 12). But the spectacle is not an end in itself, it is merely the means to the end of effective communication that God employs in order to be understood.

Likewise with miracles. John points to this fact by constantly labeling Jesus' miracles "signs." They are intended to point beyond themselves to the Miracle Worker himself who is the most intelligible of God's messages. This is why Jesus ran from those who were only interested in the spectacle for its own sake, but spent countless hours with those who got at least part of the message. He sought to be understood, and responded to those who responded to what he was seeking to communicate.

3. In the third place, let us note that God seeks response from his hearers not simply passive listening. This is a corollary to God's desire to communicate and to be understood. Communication implies response. When God commands people he expects them to respond. God's promises to people typically require a response on their part. Proper response in turn, elicits further interaction between God and human beings. Indeed, God's interactions with human beings are characteristically in the form of dialog, rather than monolog.

The Bible, from beginning to end, represents God as seeking conversation with people. And such conversation demands responsiveness on the part of human beings. We are not simply to sit like bumps on logs listening to God without responding to him. To quote Nida again,

The entire concept of the covenant of God with man is predicated upon two way communication, even though it is God who proposes and man who accepts. Of course, in Jesus Christ the "dialog" of God with man is evident in all of its fullness, but the divine human conversation is eternal, for the end of man is for fellowship and communion with God himself, and for this the communication of "dialog" is an indispensable and focal element (1960:225).

4. A fourth preliminary point is the suggestion that God has revealed in the Scriptures not only what to communicate, but how to communicate it. Perhaps the Bible is more inspired than we have previously believed. We have always considered its message inspired. I would contend that the method God used to get that message across is also inspired.

Having said this, I will not seek to further elaborate the point at this time. I simply want to make explicit my belief that we are dealing here with God-given instructions concerning how to handle his messages. If, then, what I have said above and what I will say below is true, this point is established.

5. My fifth preliminary point is to suggest that God is receptor oriented. In the communication process we have three basic elements: the communicator, the message and the receptor. Communicators engaged in the process of communication may have their attention focused on any of the three elements. That is, they may focus so intently on themselves and their own activity in the situation that they are virtually unaware of exactly what they are saying or of who they are attempting to say it to. Or they may be so focused in on what they are saying that they virtually forget both themselves and their receptors.

Or, in the third place, a communicator may so focus on his/her receptors, their concerns and the value of what he/she is saying to them, that his/her concern for him/herself and those aspects of the

message that are not relevant to the hearers is diminished. This latter is what I mean by the term receptor oriented. Each of these approaches involves all three elements. They differ only with respect to which of the elements is in primary focus.

The communicator whose primary focus is himself tends to show off. One who seeks to impress people with his own abilities in order that they will admire him tends to fall into this trap. It may matter little to him whether people understand what he says or if they benefit from it. His concern is to be admired.

The communicator who is message-centered, on the other hand, gives great attention to the way the message is phrased. His concern is for precise terminology and correct wording on the one hand, and for an elegantly constructed, well-balanced presentation of the message on the other. Again, the concern is less for whether the receptors understand the message than for the presumed accuracy of the formulation of that message. His tendency will be to resort to technically precise language, whether or not such language is intelligible to his listeners, and to homiletically perfect organization, whether or not his listeners are most attracted to that kind of a message.

A receptor-oriented communicator, on the other hand, is careful to bend every effort to meet his receptors where they are. He will choose topics that relate directly to the felt needs of the receptors, he will choose methods of presentation that are appealing to them, he will use language that is maximally intelligible to them.

What I am suggesting is that God's communication shows that he is squarely in the latter position. He is primarily oriented toward getting his message into the minds and hearts of his receptors. That is, the methods chosen, the language employed, the topics dealt with, the places and times where he encounters human beings and all other factors indicate that God is receptor-oriented. He does not, of course, always say what people like to hear. That is not required of one who is receptor-oriented.

The point is that whatever he says, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, is presented in ways and via techniques that have maximum relevance to the receptors. They do not have to go somewhere else, learn someone else's language, or become something other than they already are as a precondition to hearing his message. The message itself, of course, may require that they go somewhere else or become something else, but they are not required to make these adjustments before they can understand what God is saying to them. I will elaborate further on this point below.

- 6. In the sixth place, I'd like to suggest that God's basic method of communication is incarnational. Though the ultimate incarnation of God's communication was in Jesus Christ, God's method of using human beings to reach other human beings is also an incarnational method. In a real sense, everyone who is transformed by the power of God and genuinely lives his witness to Christ is an incarnation of God's message to human beings. It is not, I think, without significance that the early Christians at Antioch were called "little Christs" (i.e. "Christians"). God's witnesses are called by Paul "letters that have come from Christ," (2 Cor 3:3). This is incarnational communication. And even the Bible, since it consists almost entirely of case studies of such incarnations of God's communications, may be seen as an incarnational document.
- 7. Lastly, then, it is important to notice that God doesn't simply communicate, he communicates with impact. Impact is that which makes an impression, that gets people up doing things in response to what has been communicated to them. To get an idea of the kind of impact that God's communication had on people, we might simply ask ourselves what it would take to get us to do some of the things that the people of Scripture did. What would it take to stimulate Abraham to leave home, country, family and all that was familiar to him? What was it that impelled Moses to stand up against Pharaoh? What transformed the prophets, or the disciples, or Paul?

The Holy Spirit was, of course, operating in a major way when God was interacting with his people. We do not want to ignore or minimize this fact. He is always an important part of God's communicative activity. But, we must ask, is the presence of the Holy Spirit the only explanation for the fact that when God interacted with these people they did amazing things? I doubt it. For there is a very human side to communication even when God is the initiator.

And these were human beings who responded to communicational stimuli just like we do.

So our questions concern not whether or not the Holy Spirit was involved. Of course He was. Rather, we observe that these people received God's communication with the kind of impact that impelled them to do things that the world might regard as strange. And we ask, was there in God's approach the kind of dynamic that in strictly human communication produces great impact? And we conclude, at least tentatively, that indeed there was.

Now, we have learned to think of communication as largely a matter of the transfer of information from communicator to receptor. We set up schools, we buy and sell information. When we go to school, read books or go to church, we are rather like the Athenians about whom it is recorded that they were primarily concerned with "talking or hearing about the latest novelty" (Ac 17:21). If we hear a lecture or a sermon or read a book that disappoints us we very often express our criticism by saying, "I didn't learn anything new."

But the primary aim of God's communication, and hopefully of ours, is not simply to inform. It is to *stimulate* people to action. And when, via sermonizing, God's message is reduced to mere information about God rather than the passing on of stimulus from God, I wonder if we have not thwarted his purpose to some extent? The God who, through communicational channels, has had such an impact on our lives that we are in the process of transformation, desires that we communicate for him with a similar kind of impact. The characteristics by means of which He brings about that impact are delineated in the following ten points.

God's Approach: Communicating with Impact

I would now like to turn to ten characteristics of God's communication. In doing this I have in mind three primary aims: (1) to describe at least certain of the characteristics of God's communicational activity, (2) to point out how well these correspond with the insights of modern communication theory, and (3) to suggest that each characteristic is something that we ought to imitate in our

attempts to communicate on God's behalf. I make no apology for the fact that these characteristics frequently take us into territory already covered in the above list of preliminary observations. Those broader observations and these narrower characteristics are, after all, simply alternative ways of viewing the same territory.

- 1. To create communicational impact, God takes the initiative. God does not simply sit there unconcerned. When Adam and Eve got into difficulty, God took the initiative and went to where they were to initiate the communication that would enable them to at least know how to get out of their situation. When he decided to destroy mankind, God initiated communication with Noah. Likewise with Abraham, Moses, and with person after person throughout Scripture. In Christ, God took the initiative that resulted both in his most significant communication and in salvation for humanity. We learn, therefore, that as communicators from God, the initiative lies with us
- 2. When God seeks to communicate he moves into the receptor's frame of reference. I use the term "frame of reference" to designate the combination of things such as culture, language, space, time, etc., that make up the matrix within which the receptor operates. Each person operates within several frames of reference simultaneously. At one level, every person is in his own frame of reference defined by those psychological, physiological and life history characteristics that make him uniquely different from every other individual in the world.

At another level, however, each person shares with many other people a language, a culture, a geographical area, a time frame, and many other similar characteristics. If, therefore, a communicator is to be understood by his hearers, he will have to start by employing such definers of broader frames of reference as the same language, similar thought patterns, and the like and proceed to demonstrate a concern for the characteristics that define narrower frames of reference such as the personal interests and needs of the receptor.

Not infrequently, especially when communicators have some power over the receptors, they will designate their own frame of reference as that within which the communication must take place. They may, for example, use a technical type of language that they understand well but that loses their receptors. Professors and preachers often do just this when they use the jargon and thought patterns of the academic discipline that they have studied when talking to people who are not normally a part of that frame of reference.

Those who train for the ministry by going to seminary often get into the language and thought patterns of the seminary to such an extent that it may never occur to them that what they have learned needs translation into the language and thought patterns of their receptors if it is to have the desired impact on them. Many preachers, in fact, spend a large part of their ministries preaching to their homiletics professors. They have not learned that they need to use a different style to reach the people in their pews, so they simply continue to speak within the frame of reference that they learned to use in seminary.

God, however, is not like that. He uses the language and thought patterns of those to whom he speaks. He could have constructed a heavenly language and required that we all learn that language in order to hear what he has to say to us. He has the power to do that. But he uses that power to *adapt* to us, to enter our frame of reference, rather than to *extract* us from our frame of reference, rather than to *extract* us from our frame of reference into something that he has constructed. He has, apparently, no holy language, no holy culture, no sacred set of cultural and linguistic patterns that He endorses to the exclusion of all other patterns. He moves into the cultural and linguistic water in which we are immersed in order to make contact with us.

3. God's communication has great impact, furthermore, because it is *personal*. Unlike modern Americans, God refuses to mechanize communication. If he had asked our advice concerning how to win the world, we might well have suggested that He use microphones and loud speakers. Or, perhaps, we would have suggested that he write a book, or at least go on a lecture tour where he would be able to monolog with thousands of people at a time.

But the God who could have done it any way he wanted to turned away from such mass impersonal techniques to use human beings to reach other human beings and, ultimately, to become a human being himself. And as a human being he spent time with a small number of other human beings, running away from crowds in order to maximize the person-to-person nature of his interaction with that handful of disciples. We have much to learn from God's method at this point.

4. God's communication, then, is *interactional*. Note in your own experience the difference of impact between an impersonal, mass-communication type of situation and a person-to-person interactional type of situation. I'm really impressed with how little Jesus monologued. And our misunderstanding of his communication that leads us to recommend monolog preaching as if this were God's method disturbs me greatly. In the name of Jesus Christ who seldom monologued we recommend monolog preaching as the appropriate method of communication!

It seems to me utterly inexcusable for our Bible translators to reduce the nine or more Greek words used in the New Testament for communication to two words in English: preach and proclaim. But this is what has been done in most of our English translations, in spite of the fact that in New Testament times these words were used to cover a much wider area. The main word, *kerusso*, for example, signified to put across a message given by someone else to the communicator in whatever way was appropriate in the given context (see Kittel on *kerusso*). If one term is to be used in English, that term should be "communicate," not preach or proclaim, both of which signify monolog presentation. I am afraid we have not imitated Jesus in church communication nearly so much as we have imitated the Greek love for oratory. Jesus seldom, if ever, monologued. He interacted.

5. Without doubt, the most effective way to communicate something is to *demonstrate* it. When agricultural specialists seek to convince farmers they should do things differently, they set up what are called "demonstration farms." God, like those who seek to communicate agricultural innovations, therefore, goes beyond merely speaking his messages to the demonstration of them. He demonstrates his presence in human life continually in predictable and unpredictable ways that only those open to his activities are able to

properly interpret. In Jesus, then, God created his supreme demonstration of who he is and how he works.

Romans 5:8 could well be rendered, "God has demonstrated how much he loves us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." When Jesus said to Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9), he was making it quite explicit that he, Jesus, was the demonstration of God the Father. The way he loved was the way the Father loves. The way he showed kindness and acceptance to victims was the way the Father shows kindness and acceptance to victims. The way he forgave was the way the Father forgives.

In everything Jesus did he demonstrated the character and behavior of the Father. Jesus loved and used God's authority and power to demonstrate that love because God is love. Jesus set himself to bring liberty to captives and freedom to the oppressed (Lk 4:18) to demonstrate that the Father is a liberator and a bringer of freedom. He lived close to the Father to demonstrate how we should live in relation to God.

When Jesus said he sends us just as the Father sent him (Jn 20:21) and we are to be his witnesses (Ac 1:8), it is clear that we are to demonstrate the same God in the same way he did. He, therefore, empowers us with the Holy Spirit in the same way he was empowered (compare Lk 3:21–22 with Ac 1:4–5, 8) to make us adequate to carry out the tasks of demonstration.

6. A further characteristic of effective communication that God employs is that he goes beyond the predictable and the stereotypes in his communicative efforts. It seems that in all human interaction, people either have or develop well-defined impressions of other people in terms of which they categorize them. These impressions derive from memories of past experiences with people of similar age, status, appearance and the like. On this basis, then, we develop stereotypes in terms of which we predict what is likely to happen when we interact with people who fit into a given category.

When our expectation comes true—that is, when the person acts according to our prediction—the communicational impact of whatever that person says or does is very low. If, on the other hand, that

person acts or speaks in a way that is unexpected in terms of the stereotype, the communicational impact is much greater. The principle may be stated as follows: if within a given frame of reference the information communicated is predictable, the impact of the communication will be low. If, however, within that frame of reference the information communicated is unexpected, the impact of the communication will be high. That's why, in Philippians 2:5–8, we see Jesus going through a two-step process. He could easily have become man, and, as man, simply announced that he was God. But reading between the lines of the passage, we see that as a human being he refused to demand the respect that he had a right to demand. He refused to use his title. Nobody was going to call him Reverend or Doctor. They did eventually call him Rabbi, but they learned to call him Rabbi on the basis of what he *earned*, rather than on the basis of what he demanded. And I think this is a critical difference.

Jesus established his credibility, earned his respect, by what he did within the receptors' frame of reference. He called himself man (i.e., Son of man) until they recognized him as God. And even when the disciples recognized that he was God, he forbade them to use that title for him. I believe he did not want others to use a title that he had not earned in interaction with them.

People have, of course, well-defined stereotypes of God. If, for example, Jesus had remained in his predictable glory or even, as a man, associated predictably with the powerful, the elite, the religiously safe people, the impact of what he sought to communicate would have been comparatively small. But he went beyond the predictable stereotypes at point after point and thereby increased enormously the impact of his communication. He went beyond the predictable to become a human being, and then even as a human being went beyond the predictable to become a commoner, and then as a commoner chose to associate with tax collectors and prostitutes, to go to such places as a raucous wedding feast and even to submit to a criminal's death.

As human beings, we too are boxed into stereotypes by those who interact with us. We are stereotyped according to our age group, whatever titles we possess, the kinds of people we associate with, the kinds of places we go to, etc. If we have a title such as

Reverend or Doctor, if we fit into a category such as student or teacher, if we are male or if we are female, people will relate to us according to their expectations of the category by means of which they label us.

It is, then, unlikely that they will pay much attention to the messages that we seek to communicate as long as those messages are according to their expectations from a person in our category. If, for example, we are known to them as "Christians," and we say the kinds of things that they expect Christians to say, they may discount most or all of what we say. The impact of the communication will, however, be quite different if they find that we care for them more than they expect Christians to care for them or if we relate to them in a more genuine manner than they expect.

7. God's communication, then, goes beyond generalities to become very specific to real life. And such specificity increases the impact of these messages. Many general messages are, of course, quite true. The general message, "God is love," for example, is unquestionably true. But his love put in the form of such a general statement has very little communicational impact. His love put in the form of a specific Christian individual, ministering to the specific needs of someone in need, however, has great impact. Even in language, the difference in impact between the statement, "God loves everyone," and, "God loves me," is great. Note in this regard the great difference in impact between the statement of a major point in a sermon and a well-chosen illustration of that point that applies it to the real-life situation of the hearers.

Jesus frequently used true to life stories that we call parables to specifically relate his teachings to the lives of his hearers. When someone asked him, "Who is my neighbor?", he employed the Parable of the Good Samaritan to make his teaching specific. When he sought to communicate truth concerning God as a loving father, he told the story we know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. He continually taught his disciples by dealing specifically with the life in which they were involved. He taught us all by ministering specifically to the needs of those around him.

And the Bible that records these events is characterized by the specific life relatedness of a casebook. If God had communicated in our way, he might have written a theology textbook. Textbooks are noted for the large number of general and technical statements that they make concerning their subject matter. A casebook, however, is characterized by the kind of specificity to real life that the Bible is full of. The biblical accounts concern specific people in specific times and places with specific needs that are dealt with by means of specific interactions with God. God, in his communication, goes beyond the general to the specific. So should we.

8. God's communication *invites personal discovery*. The most impactful kind of learning is that which comes to us via discovery. In our Western educational procedures, however, we seem to go largely against this principle. As a teacher, I'm supposed to predigest the material that I want to communicate to you and to simply dish it out for you in a form that requires little effort on your part. In school, we get predigested lectures followed by testing techniques designed to force us to get that material first into our notebooks, then from our notes into our heads.

Our churches, then, have been patterned after the lecture procedures of our classrooms, except that in church we give no exams. This means that church communication is largely ineffective, since it imitates the predigestion method of the schools but does not include tests and grades. For it is tests and grades that schoolteachers count on to at least partially compensate for the lack of discovery involved in this kind of communication.

Note, for example, the difference between our ability to remember those things that someone simply tells us and our ability to remember those things that we discover on our own. Jesus specialized not in predigesting information in order to present it to his hearers in bite-size chunks, but in leading his hearers to discovery. This is why his answers were so often in the form of questions. This is also why his hearers often found him to be difficult. When John the Baptist was in prison and sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if he was indeed the coming Messiah, Jesus did not give him a straight, predigested answer. His answer was designed to lead John to a life-transforming discovery.

Likewise with Pilate when he asked Jesus if he was indeed the king of the Jews. Jesus seems to respect people too much to simply give them a predigested answer. I believe again, that the casebook format of the Bible is designed to lead us into impactful discovery learning that will transform our lives, rather than to simply increase our store of information concerning God.

9. A ninth characteristic of God's communicative activity is that he invites the receptor to identify with himself. In incarnation God identifies with the receptor. By so doing, however, he makes it possible for the receptor to complete what might be thought of as the communicational circle. That is, when the communicator gets close enough to the receptor to identify with him/her, the receptor is able to identify, in turn, with the communicator.

As receptors, we seem to be able to understand messages best when we perceive that the communicator knows where we are. If he/she is able to get into our frame of reference, to establish personal credibility with us, to get to specific messages that show us he/she knows where we are, then we will find our ability to relate to the communicator and to his/her message greatly enhanced. When the communicator relates to us in such a way that we can say, "I'm just like that," the impact of the message on us is greatly increased. That is why it is so tragic when preachers put themselves so high above the people that they can't identify with them. The people may feel the preacher is not where they are and cannot understand them well enough to say anything helpful to them.

How, for example, do you respond when someone from the wealthy Kennedy family talks about the struggles of ordinary people to make a living? We are likely to dismiss whatever such a person says on this subject on the assumption that they have never had to experience what they are talking about. On the other hand, how do we react when we hear a member of that same family talking about suffering and death? At this point we are likely to have quite a different attitude, since we know that they have experienced great tragedy in these areas and have, therefore, earned their right to speak to us concerning them.

Before God came to earth in Jesus Christ, how credible was anything he had to say concerning human life? It is all quite different

now, however. For we know that Jesus lived and learned and suffered and died as one of us. Because, therefore, he identified with us, we can relate to him. We could not identify with a book or a loud-speaker, only with a human being. When, therefore, he says, live as I have lived, suffer as I have suffered, give as I have given, we can follow him.

10. The tenth characteristic of God's communication is that he communicates with such impact that people give themselves in commitment to his cause. This is an indication of the ultimate in impactful communication. It is not difficult to communicate simple information. It is only slightly more difficult to communicate in such a way that the receptor gets excited about what he/she has heard. But to communicate in such a way that the receptor leaves what he is doing and commits him/herself to the cause of the communicator, this is the ultimate indication of communicational impact. Jesus said to the disciples, "Commit yourselves to me." And they did, even to the extent that they defied the whole Roman empire. That's impact. That's the kind of communicator God is. And it is his example that we need to follow in our communicational efforts—not to get people to follow us but to mediate God's communication in such a way that they will follow him.



Chapter Three

FOLLOWING JESUS' EXAMPLE

What I want to do in this chapter is to elaborate on, apply and extend the principles described in Chapter Two. The special focus of Chapter Two was on the activity of God in communication. The focus of this chapter is to suggest what we need to do to follow Jesus' example. I am excited at this point in my life about the fact that Jesus not only died for us but that he *lived* for us. That is, he lived a human life that we are intended to and able to imitate. He said, "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21) and "Whoever believes in me will do what I do" (Jn 14:12). And among the many aspects of his life that we ought to imitate is the communicational example that he set.

I finished Chapter Two with the contention that the ultimate impact of communication is to get the receptor to give him/herself for the cause of the communicator. God's communication has, of course, impacted our lives in such a way that we have done just that. Our commitment to him and his cause involves, however, a commitment to communicate to others as he has to us.

In 1 Corinthians 11:1, the Apostle Paul says, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." This is not, as it may seem, arrogance. It stems, rather, from the recognition that as a communicator, one who stands before people with a message to get across to them, one cannot avoid the fact that the process of winning people to someone else involves first the winning of people to oneself. The credibility of the communicator is, therefore, an integral part of the effectiveness of the communicational process. As I suggest in point 6 below, the messenger is not separable from his/her message.

Paul put himself squarely on the line by making a statement like that. He did not try to avoid his responsibility as I have heard many contemporary preachers do by saying, "Lord, don't let them see me, let them see Jesus only." Paul seems to know that if his hearers were going to see Jesus at all, it had to be *through* him, not apart from him.

Two experiences in my life have driven this point home to me in a remarkable way. The first was an experience I had with a very intelligent and otherwise perceptive seminary professor. Unfortunately, he did not see the close connections between what he was and what he said. Or, at least, he tried to avoid responsibility for any contradiction between his life and his words. What he said was, "Don't do what I do, do what I say." Now, fortunately, his life was not that much different from what he recommended. So we had little difficulty accepting both what he said and what he did. But the philosophy that he articulated is communicationally bankrupt.

The other experience was a thought that came to me one day as I surveyed the territory in rural Nigeria where my family served as the only missionaries. The majority of the people there, unlike here in America, had never even heard the name of Jesus Christ. Thus, when we spoke of him they had no background independent of the Christian witnesses in terms of which to judge what Jesus must be like. They could not read the Scriptures, they were not acquainted with the two thousand years of Christian history that are so familiar to us, they could only watch those of us who called ourselves Christian.

As I pondered these things, the thought came to me that, from their point of view, I am Jesus Christ! And it blew my mind. I was forced to recognize that I stood squarely in the gap between them and God. To them I was the demonstration of Jesus, just as Jesus had been the demonstration of the Father. To them Jesus looked like I looked, he acted like I acted, he loved like I loved, he spoke, He ate, he drank, he traveled, he lived as I did. If they were going to see the love of God that Jesus lived to express, they would have to see it through me. What a responsibility! And yet, such a responsibility is not unique to a missionary in a pioneer area of the world. It is

the responsibility of each one of us who stands and attempts to communicate in Jesus' name.

With respect to incarnation God, of course, could go much farther than we can. He was able to incarnate himself as a distinct human being in a particular language and culture of his choosing in such a way that he experienced the full biological and cultural process of birth, learning, living and death within that culture. We do not have such an option, given the fact that we have already been born into and taught by families that we did not have the luxury of choosing. Thus, when we seek to reach people who live in a frame of reference different from our own, we are always limited by at least two factors that Jesus did not experience when he participated in first-century Hebrew culture.

First of all, we have not learned the cultural basis of our receptors' frame of reference as children. Secondly, then, we are always hindered in our attempts to understand our receptors by the fact that we have been trained into quite a different frame of reference. When speaking of human communication, therefore, we may better use the term "identification," enabling us to relate to the receptors as friends, rather than the term incarnation that would enable us to become their kin. We do this in recognition of the fact that the best we can do, even when we imitate God's incarnational approach, is to become friends with our receptors by identifying with them. We can never fully enter their frame of reference as we might if we were born into it.

Nevertheless, even though we must settle for something less than full incarnation, we may imitate God's communicational approach by doing our best to employ God's principles. At the God end of the bridge, we give continual attention to relating to and listening to God. What we hear him saying, then, we bring across the bridge and do our best to present it in his way to those at the human end of the bridge.

Employing God's Principles at the Human End of the Bridge

1. The first principle is the major principle: just as God is receptor oriented, so should we be. I attempt to be so oriented. Thus, as I write this I have to continually ask myself difficult questions such as, "Where are you the readers?" and "Will what I am saying be helpful to you?" I must then do my best to guess what the answer is. I don't know most of you, so the chances of my being wrong are high. But I must guess either by assuming that many of you are like me and analogizing from experiences that I have had or by assuming you are like others with whom I have had experience. To the extent that your experience fits into either of these categories and I am able to speak into it, this communication will be successful.

If we go into a situation in which we don't know the people, our receptor orientation should compel us to do some investigating to find out what those people are like. What are their interests? What needs are they aware of? What aspects of our message would be most likely to attract them? We might interview those who know the unfamiliar situation. If there are books written about those people, we should read them.

Such advice may seem obvious for those going to another society. What we often ignore, however, is the fact that there are major gaps between people even within the same society. I cannot assume, for example, that Americans who are, say, thirty (or even twenty or ten) years younger than I am will always be on the same wavelength with me throughout this book. For American society creates major communication gaps between generations. Whether in writing or in person, then, I must do whatever I can to learn about differences within America as well as those between American and other societies. And I must be prepared to be misunderstood.

But, if I am to imitate Jesus' approach to communication, I need to do whatever I can to understand the receptors' frame of reference and to speak into it. I, like Jesus, need to use their language and thought patterns, to speak to their desires and felt needs, to not take

for granted the relevance of my interests to them and their acceptance of me, even if we are members of the same society.

The point is that once we know enough to be receptor oriented, we must face certain important questions on a number of topics. For example:

With regard to receptors themselves—Where are the receptors? What are they interested in? What is it going to take to reach them?

With regard to the message—Is this message important to them? If so, how should it be handled? Are these receptors prepared to understand and make use of the material we present?

With regard to their attitude toward us—What is their general attitude toward us (e.g., respect, disdain, fear)? Concerning what topics do we have their permission to speak? Under what conditions are they most likely to respond positively to us?

With regard to the way we present the message—How should this message be presented so as to have maximum acceptance and impact? What kind of language should be used?

It is not enough that we as communicators have a message to present. It must be presented into a context governed by the receptors. We must, therefore, pay careful attention to the way we present our messages, lest the way we make our presentations, the language we employ, the attitudes we project, deter our hearers from understanding what we intend that they understand. Our concern for the importance of the message committed to us, therefore, requires that we, like God, be receptor oriented.

2. A second point at which, I believe, we should be more careful to imitate God is at the point of taking the initiative. Just as God did not stand and wait for others to seek him out, neither should we stand and wait. We have to go figuratively as well as actually where people are. We often establish our churches and other Christian organizations in such a way that the only way people will know we exist is by coming to where we are. I might refer to this as a "yellow pages" approach to evangelization. It is easy to assume that people know we exist and that they are convinced of our relevance, even though we know this is not true. Now, I am not simply speaking

of the way we place our church buildings. We cannot, of course, be proud of the "waiting game" that characterizes many of our churches. They seem to say, "The people know we are here, if they want us they will seek us out." My primary focus is on something more subtle than the placement of church buildings. That is the fact that a person sitting right next to us in the same room may be psychologically even more distant from us than many people on the other side of the world from us. And if we are to imitate God, we need to take the initiative to reach out to that person also.

Or, if you are a pastor, there may be a great psychological difference between you and many of the members of the congregation. You cannot simply assume that if they attend regularly they are getting the messages that you think they are getting. You may not be getting close enough to them psychologically and communicationally for them to really benefit from what you are saying. They, on the other hand, may simply be attending church out of habit or because they feel that God will bless them more if they spend this time with his people. To reach them, you may have to take the initiative.

One aspect of taking the initiative is to not assume too much with regard to the credibility, the trust and confidence, that people have in us. If we are not well known to the people we seek to communicate with, of course, we must establish our credibility with them in order to be listened to at all. We often, however, ignore the sense in which, even when people know us well, we need to reestablish our credibility in each new communicational situation. Whatever the situation demands, then, with respect to developing a trust relationship between ourselves and our receptors, we need to take the initiative to establish our credibility.

Another way of saying this is to suggest that we need to win the right to be heard in every communicational situation. Imitating Jesus, we should not depend on credentials or past victories. With Paul, we should "forget what is behind" us (Phil 3:13). Paul had incredible credentials which he outlined in verses 4–6 of Philippians 3. But he, like Jesus, determined to earn his respect on the basis of what he did in the present context, rather than to demand respect on the basis of past accomplishments.

3. The initiative that we take, then, is to move toward the receptor, into his frame of reference. Just as God does, we need to employ the receptor's language, including his slang or jargon, key our message into his world of experience and interest, and over all refuse to give in to the temptation to force him into linguistic and conceptual territory that is familiar to us but not to him. The temptation to extract people from where they are into where we are in order that we may feel more comfortable in dealing with them is a strong temptation indeed.

We found it at work on the mission field where people were encouraged to learn our language and our culture in order to adequately understand the message that we sought to communicate to them. It happens, however, in our home society as well where those who have been taught to understand and speak about God in theological terminology are very often tempted to require that their hearers learn to understand their language and thought patterns before they can properly understand the message of God.

Yet we often do not really know where our receptors are. One of the dangerous things that often happens to a person when he takes a pastorate or other Christian service position is that he assumes that he knows where his people are. Preacher after preacher has had to find another pastorate, or even another occupation because that assumption turned out to be wrong. One problem is, of course, that we are trained in classrooms for occupations that are usually quite unlike anything that goes on in our classrooms. Some of our problems would be solved if we were trained to do things by *doing* those things rather than by simply *thinking* about doing those things. When we spend our time thinking about things we learn to think about things. When we do things we learn how to do things.

One pastor I know did what I think is exactly the right thing. He took a pastorate in a small industrial town in New England soon after he graduated from college. He had, however, barely settled into that pastorate when he took a job in a factory. When the church leaders found out about this, they questioned his motives. They knew they were not paying him a very high salary, but they did expect him to be full-time. His reply was something as follows:

I am full-time. All of the money I make in the factory I give directly to the church. My problem is that I have spent all of my life to date in school. I just don't know where you people are. You spend from 9 to 5 every day in the factory. Until I have worked in the factory from 9 to 5 day after day for awhile, I won't know what your life is like and have no right to speak to you. After awhile I'll quit working in the factory. But I must learn what it's like first.

This is the kind of identificational approach that I am recommending. His sermons from that time on were right where the people were. He was constantly talking about his interaction with the people on either side of him where he was working in the factory. He refused to assume that he knew where his hearers were simply because he'd been in school and studied a bit about them. He got out there and learned about his people by doing the things that they did in the kinds of contexts in which they spent their lives. He didn't work very long in the factory, he didn't have to. He only had to work long enough to get a feel for where his congregation was so that he could use this understanding to get into their frame of reference.

Anything not in the receptors' frame of reference is virtually unintelligible to him/her. We can bring in new information from outside into the frame of reference of the receptors, but everything depends on how we bring it in. People learn, apparently, by analogies. But these analogies must be familiar enough to them from within their experience to make the point that the communicator is trying to make. When the point is made, then, the receptors recombine the material that is already in their heads with the new material to arrive at new understandings.

It is the job of the communicator to so present his/her new material within the receptor's frame of reference that the receptor can interact with it thoroughly, thereby producing constructive new understandings within his/her head. I am not suggesting that we cannot present new material to our receptors. On the contrary, if we look at Jesus' example, we find that he frequently introduced new material. But he used familiar forms such as parables and analogies from the life experience of his receptors in order to maximize their ability to integrate the new information into their frame of reference.

4. But even though we may have entered the receptor's frame of reference, there is still no assurance that we will communicate effectively unless we have gained his/her respect. As I have already suggested, there is a distancing that takes place when one allows him/herself to be known by a title. Titles designate stereotypes, assigned positions that people have in relationship to other people. But when we assign someone a position in some category other than our own category, we isolate him/her from ourselves. The title, the stereotype, enables us to predict not only the position of that person in relationship to ourselves, but the behavior of that person. And if he/she conforms to that stereotype, we say, "What should we expect?"

One very interesting indication of the kind of stereotype that lay people have of preachers is the way that the preacher in the Pogo comic strip is presented. All of the other characters in that comic strip are represented as speaking in ordinary type. But the preacher is presented as speaking in Old English type! This is a clever way of showing in print both the stereotype people have of preachers and the distance that is ordinarily understood to exist between preachers and common people. The way preachers are portrayed in movies and on television provides additional insight into such stereotyping.

What is the answer to this problem? When one is caught in a damaging stereotype, what should one do? I believe we should attempt to escape by refusing to be predictable in terms of that stereotype. There are, of course, ways of not conforming to a stereotype that will ultimately hinder the communication. I am not suggesting that we employ means that would be inconsistent with the message that we seek to communicate. Nor am I suggesting that anything unpredictable that we might do will help the communication. I could, for example, use language in this presentation that would be both unpredictable and detrimental to the communication. There is, however, a kind of unpredictability that I would like to recommend that is both consistent with what Jesus did and a distinct asset to communication whenever we find ourselves boxed in by a stereotype.

5. What I would like to suggest is that we attempt to overcome the distancing created by a stereotype by becoming a genuine human being to our receptors. Think, for example, of certain stereotypes and then ask yourself the question, what is the opposite of each of those stereotypes? You will discover, I think, that you, along with most other receptors, will tend to think of people as either preachers or human beings, either teachers or human beings, either young people or human beings, etc. This may be slightly overstated but only slightly if at all. I think there is an important truth in the observation that we tend to define people who are like us as human beings, while we define those on the other side of a stereotype boundary from us in terms of whatever the generalized characteristics of that stereotype seem to be in our minds.

I came across this fact in a dramatic way one time in Nigeria. I was discussing with one of my friends some aspect of Euro-American society when he remarked to me, "Fear God, fear the White Man." This statement turned out to be one of their proverbs. And as I began to probe the meaning of the proverb, I became aware of the fact that not only were we whites distanced from them by their stereotype of us, we were also linked in their minds with God rather than with human beings.

As I pondered this, it was not difficult for me to understand. From their point of view, only God and whites had the power to produce automobiles, bicycles, grain-grinding machines, radios, airplanes, and the like. Furthermore, only God and whites could be so confident, self-assured, free from fear and unpredictable. Human beings (that is, people like themselves) are not powerful, not wealthy, fairly predictable, not self-assured, fearful, etc. So everything seemed to indicate that we whites fit into the God category rather than into the human being category. What I began to ask myself, then, was how am I going to become a human being to them in order that I might communicate to them on a person-to-person level?

For example, what is the difference in a surgeon's relationship with people who first get to know him as a human being and only later discover that he is a surgeon, and with those who first get to know him in terms of his title? Sometimes, if they first get to know a doctor by his/her title who then says and does things more like ordinary people than they expect of such a person, they will remark, "Gee, you sure don't act like a doctor!" If one is a teacher who acts like an ordinary person, they may say out loud, "You don't act like a teacher," then to themselves think, "You act like a human being." People respond similarly to those who are preachers, parents, Christians, lawyers or in any other respectable position if they behave unpredictably. Such words indicate that somehow that person has broken out of the stereotype and has become for them a human being. If such identification with the human beingness of the receptors is done in a proper way, it will greatly enhance one's ability to communicate with them.

I would like to suggest a five step process for escaping from a stereotype into the human being category of our receptors. (1) The first step is to try to *understand* them. This is not always easy and it is not always enjoyable. Oftentimes we are called upon to attempt to communicate with people of whom we really don't approve. We may not even like them or accept their lifestyles. But we must attempt to understand them in terms of their own frame of reference if we are to have any chance of becoming credible to them.

- (2) Then we must go beyond simply understanding them to *empathizing* with them. Empathy is the attempt to put ourselves in the place of those to whom we are trying to relate. It involves us in attempting to look at the world in the way that our receptors are looking at it. We may have to say to ourselves, "If I assumed the world to be what they assume it to be, how would I think and act?" If we properly understand and empathize, then, we should come to a fairly good understanding of what their definition of human beingness is. For it may be quite different from our definition.
- (3) This, then, puts us in a good position to take the third step, which is to *identify* with our receptors. Now, identification is a difficult concept. And many people have the wrong impression of it. They think identifying with others is becoming fake. And sometimes it can be. Many think of older people trying to speak young people's language, dress like young people and grow beards. But true identification is not being fake. It is not trying to become someone else. It is, rather, taking the trouble to become more than what one ever

was before by genuinely entering into the life of another person or group.

There are dimensions to most of us that we have never really probed. And identifying with another person or group, genuinely entering into his/her frame of reference, challenges us to probe another of these unprobed areas. One of the amazing things about human beings is that we can become bicultural. We can, by entering into the lives of other people, become just as real in that context as we are in our normal context. It takes more work, it takes a lot of learning, a lot of modifying. However, when we find our efforts paying off to the extent that people remark, "You are just like one of us," we begin to realize that it is very much worth it.

- (4) But in order to do this, we need to take the fourth step and to participate in the lives of the people we are trying to reach. Beyond simply identifying with them and their life is participating in it with them. This, of course, needs to be done with caution. But we see, I think, in Jesus' ministry a kind of fearlessness concerning what people might say about him when he went to even disreputable places and associated with even disreputable people. He "lost his testimony" for the sake of the people that he sought to win by participating with them in their lives.
- (5) The fifth stage, then, in attempting to become a human being in order to reach human beings, is what has been termed "self-disclosure." One could go all the way to the participation stage in this process and never really let others know what one is like beneath his/her skin. It is, unfortunately, possible to identify and participate with people without really giving oneself to those people. Thus, it is necessary to go beyond participation to self-disclosure. This is the practice of sharing one's innermost feelings with those with whom one participates.

Self-disclosure is not the kind of questionable practice that some indulge in when they share intimate details of their inner life in their public presentations. It is, rather, the sharing of one's innermost feelings with those within the receptor group with whom one has earned intimacy. At this level, the confession of faults, doubts, and insecurities becomes a valid part of one's testimony rather than a disqualification of one's right to speak convincingly.

I believe Jesus related to at least some (perhaps not all) of his disciples at this intimate level. Even our records show him at the self-disclosure level when he cries over Jerusalem, when he casts out the money changers, and when in Gethsemane he begs God to accomplish his purposes in some other way than via death. Becoming a genuine, credible human being to our receptors takes us beyond understanding, empathy, identification and participation to this kind of self-disclosure.

One final word would seem to be in order before I turn to my next point. That is to point out that in order to reach people in a frame of reference other than our own in the way that I am recommending, we do not have to either convert to that frame of reference as our preferred way of life in the sense that we adopt our receptors' lifestyle, nor do we have to uncritically endorse that way of life. Certainly Jesus, by becoming a common person in first-century Palestine, did not endorse every aspect of the lives of those with whom he participated. When, however, he spoke critically of their lives, he spoke as one who was committed to them as a participant in their lives rather than as an outsider who simply threw stones at them.

Perhaps this is why he got so upset with the Pharisee who, in the story recorded in John 8, sought to stone the woman taken in adultery. I believe part of what he was saying to them was that, unless they participated in real life the way she was forced to participate in it, and understood life from her perspective, and still could maintain their righteousness, they had no right to condemn her. I don't believe that Jesus condoned her activity, but neither did he condone the right of outsiders to condemn her according to laws that they, within their own context, were unable to obey.

When one lives in two worlds, all that is required is the acceptance of the validity of each way of life. We do not even condone much of what goes on within our own world, much less that which goes on within someone else's world. We must understand that their world, though it may differ considerably from ours, is no less valid as a way of life than is ours. And yet, we may still prefer our original frame of reference to that of those whom we seek to reach. There is nothing wrong with this. For there is no necessity for a

bicultural person—one who has become more than what he/she was when he/she was simply monocultural—to convert to the second culture or subculture. He/she can, like Paul, be a Jew with Jews and a Greek with Greeks (1 Cor. 9:20) without losing his/her authenticity.

6. In the sixth place, then, we point to the fact that we, like Jesus, need to demonstrate the messages we seek to communicate. For, in keeping with both communication theory and the example of Jesus, we need to recognize that the messenger him/herself is the major component of the total message. As much as we might like to avoid this kind of responsibility, as much as it frightens us to recognize the responsibility involved here, I believe we must accept this fact. For, as McLuhan has pointed out, the medium that transmits the message conveys a message of its own.

Some people try to avoid their responsibility in this regard by attempting to separate widely between the message they seek to communicate and their own behavior. The professor mentioned above who said, "Don't do what I do, do what I say" is a case in point. His approach was unrealistic at best, irresponsible at worst, though it must be said that a professor who only spends a few hours a week with his students might be better able to pull off such a philosophy than someone who has greater and more total involvement with those to whom he communicates. The major thing a professor (or a preacher) communicates is, however, what he/she does, not what he/she says. Indeed, the main thing we learn from professors and preachers is how to be professors and preachers, not as we think, the messages that they articulate verbally! For this reason I recommend in the final chapter what I believe to be a better total model for the kind of communication that we seek to get across as Christians.

Since we the messengers are ourselves the major part of the message we seek to communicate, it is crucial that if we are in a pastoral situation we spend as much time as possible with the people in our congregation. It is in visitation, rather than in preaching, that the majority of important communication goes on. Sermonizing is more like the display in a store window than like the merchandise on the counters. Store managers know that it is very important to have good display in the windows. But they also know that their

business will not be successful if they spend all their time decorating the windows and none of their time making sure that they have good merchandise inside the store.

A pastor, therefore, who spends most of his/her time preparing the window display (the sermons) and little time dealing with the people and the merchandise he/she has to present to them on an individual level, will not be very effective in the Lord's business. Likewise a pastor who keeps a great distance between him/herself and the people, such a pastor may be able to perform well in front of the people but that performance then becomes a part of the message. And people learn all kinds of strange things concerning God by observing such performances.

The fact that God became a human being to reach human beings is not only relevant as a technique for putting his messages across, it is an essential characteristic of the message itself. It is, furthermore, something that we must imitate if we are to accurately communicate God's message. Christianity is Someone to follow, not simply information to assimilate. And that Someone came in love and power demonstrating God to humans.

If we are to properly follow Jesus, then, our lives must line up as demonstrations of him. Just as his primary message was in who he was and what he did—and only secondarily in what he said—so must our lives be the primary carriers of his message. We are to relate to the Father as he related to the Father, to carry across the bridge the same relational message he carried, to love as he loved, to accept as he accepted, to heal as he healed, to free people from demons and other types of captivity as he freed, to speak as he spoke. As the Father sent him, so he sends us (Jn 20:21) to do what he did to demonstrate who God is and what he desires for human-kind. If our lives contradict that message, the information we seek to get across is worthless.

As evangelicals, we have long recognized that God is a God of love. As we represent him, then, we are to love as he loved. There is, however, another facet of the demonstration of who God is and what he seeks to do among humans that evangelicals usually neglect. This is the area of spiritual power. Jesus said, "Whoever has seen

me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). As an important part of Jesus' demonstration of God the Father, then, he healed, cast out demons and did other things we call "miraculous." For God is a God of power as well as a God of love. And Jesus demonstrated that power by using it in the service of God's love.

Jesus, in coming to earth, had agreed with the Father that he would lay aside his right to behave as God (Phil 2:6–8). At his baptism, however, he accepted the gift of the Holy Spirit and, though still fully human, thereafter operated in full dependence upon the Father in Holy Spirit power. And with this power he launched into a ministry of freeing people from Satan (Lk 4:18). During his ministry, Jesus gave his disciples his own authority and power "to drive out demons and to cure diseases" (Lk 9:1) and sent them out to demonstrate the same power wrapped in love he himself exhibited.

At the end of his ministry, then, he instructed those disciples 1) to "wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you" (Lk 24:49), 2) in that power to go out as his witnesses to the world (Ac 1:8) and 3) to teach their followers "to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20), presumably including how to use the gift of Holy Spirit power to show the Father's love. It is recorded, then, that the disciples' experience paralleled that of Jesus in that they, too, received a filling of the Holy Spirit after which they went out to witness with mighty signs and wonders accompanying their words (Ac 2:43; 5:12; 14:3; Rom 15:18–19; 2 Cor 12:12). The disciples, then, have passed this instruction on to us (in the New Testament) so that we, like them, can function in the power of God to demonstrate the love of God.

Those of us who have claimed this right and begun to claim the power of the Holy Spirit whom God has given us to perform the works of Jesus have discovered that Jesus is keeping his promise that "whoever believes in me will do what I do" (Jn 14:12). See my 1989 book *Christianity With Power* for more on this subject. Jesus has never taken away from the church the gifts he gave us. We must, however, balance the demonstration of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4–11) with the demonstration of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) if we are to truly follow Jesus' example. Those who

operate in the gifts but do not manifest the fruit of the Spirit are demonstrating but a partial gospel.

7. Now, as our seventh major point, we turn to the *relevance* of the messages that the communicators present. Not only must the communicators themselves demonstrate the authenticity and credibility of their messages but both person and word must be perceived by the receptors as relevant. Their messages must speak to the felt (or perceived) needs of those who hear them.

The whole matter of perception by the receptors is at this point (as at all other points) crucial. I once heard a theologian say, "There is nothing more relevant than the Christian message." He said this as if relevance is something that is attached to a given subject matter for ever and ever. Yet we have to ask the question: "If the Christian message is inherently relevant, why are so many people perceiving it to be irrelevant?" I believe the reason lies in the fact that relevance is *constructed* by the receptors in communicational situations.

For relevance is as relevance is perceived. Again, as in all areas of communication, the final verdict is up to the receptor. As I discuss in the next chapter, receptors construct the meanings they respond to. If you take what I'm saying to be relevant it is because you have perceived and constructed it that way in this situation. You have received it as relevant. You have been able to connect it with something in your own experience, some need that you have come to feel. If, however, you perceive what I'm saying to be irrelevant, I've probably not been successful in trying to relate it to your felt needs. Perhaps I had assumed that you had needs in areas where you don't have needs. So you have been unable to construct this message as relevant to your particular situation.

The gospel is like that too. It is not perceived as relevant by everyone, unfortunately. It would be very nice if it were. It would be very nice if we could just stand up and do what some people recommend—simply present the gospel as best we can and leave the rest to God. In some sense, of course, we have to do that, for we are dependent on the Holy Spirit to bring people to respond to God. But there are disturbing instances where we think the Holy Spirit ought to make it relevant to people but he doesn't seem to.

Yet it seems that when we do our jobs better, the Holy Spirit usually does his job better. The variable in this whole situation, though, is not the Holy Spirit. He always does his work well. The variable is us. For we don't always do well what God wants us to do. So we need to do our best to present that message that has transformed our lives in such a way that it is perceived as relevant to the people to whom we speak and before whom we live. And that means relating it to their felt needs.

Relevance and felt needs, though, are matters of the here-and-now. We are living now and so are our hearers. Yet the documents we work with (the Bible) are relating God's messages to other people in other times and places. And because of that fact it is easy to fall into the mistake of dealing with Scriptures as if God's main intent were merely to provide interesting (or sometimes dull) history lessons or linguistic expositions. We who have trained for Christian ministry often have our minds so full of such a variety of interesting and helpful classroom-type details concerning the Scriptures that we insist on regularly transporting our hearers back into biblical times and places rather than on understanding and interpreting Scriptural messages in relation to their felt needs.

I was taught in seminary that exegetical and expository preaching are better than topical preaching. The validity of this point lies in the fact that unless pulpit attention to current topics is solidly grounded in the Scriptures, it is unworthy of the Christian communicator. I think, however, that we need to add two important qualifications to any recommendation of exegetical or expository preaching: 1) if it is to be true to the relevance criterion here recommended (and, I believe, exhibited in Scripture), preaching must be topical enough to relate to the felt needs of these people at this time and in this place and 2) if it is to be fully scriptural we must imitate Jesus who was always topical. To be scriptural is, I believe, to deal scripturally with topics perceived by our hearers to be relevant to their felt needs, whether or not our speaking is exegetical or expository.

The concept of felt need must not be understood as merely a superficial kind of thing. People do, of course, have needs of which they are aware. These are usually articulated in questions they ask at the surface level. And attention to these is often the only "gate-way" by means of which a communicator will be allowed to get through to his/her receptors. Once that gateway has been used, however, there appear increasingly deeper levels of need only some of which the receptors could have articulated early in the relationship. Some of these needs may have been there at the start but felt only at a subconscious level if at all.

What often happens in effective Christian communication is that trust and credibility of messenger and message is first established through interaction at a fairly superficial (perhaps even trivial) level. In the interaction, then, the receptor enters a process by means of which he/she both discovers deeper needs and develops greater confidence in the messenger. That confidence, then, enables him/her to share these needs more boldly and, as solutions are discovered, to probe ever more deeply and to find ever deeper answers to needs never before recognized. Needs felt at the beginning of such interaction, then, pale in significance as the deeper ones come more into focus and the perceived relevance of Christian solutions to ever deeper felt needs emerges.

One area of high relevance for most of the peoples of the world is the area of spiritual power. The felt need for more ability to deal with hurtful incursions into the human world of what are perceived to be evil spiritual powers is probably the greatest felt need of most non-Westerners and, increasingly, of Westerners. Jesus, working in a society in which that was among the highest felt needs, employed the power of the Holy Spirit to demonstrate God's concern for and ability to release people from Satan's power. We are called and empowered to be just as relevant today in this area as Jesus was in his day (see Kraft 1989).

8. As in Jesus' ministry, so in ours, the relevance of Christian messages to felt needs is demonstrated when such messages are specific to the real life of the receptors. As noted, one of the great things about the Scriptures is that they deal in casebook fashion with real life people in real situations. And even when Jesus taught via parables, these were true-to-life stories, many of which are so characteristic of real life that it is hard to believe that they didn't actually happen.

In Jesus' name, though, we often fail to follow his example. Instead, we tend to deal with our subject matter at such a general level that there is little or no perception of relevance on the part of our hearers. If we use good illustrations and/or get personal we are more effective because we have gotten specific. It is via the specificity of the illustration or the personal account, then, that whatever is communicated gets across, not via the general points in our outlines. And many an unaware preacher has effectively communicated something quite different via his illustrations than what he intended to get across!

I was at a large meeting of young people one time when I decided to test the degree to which the young people were paying attention to the speaker. So I worked out on a piece of paper what might be referred to as a makeshift "cough meter." There were nine thousand young people at that meeting and the weather outside was very cold, so nearly everyone was coughing. What I did, therefore, was to try to draw a line on my paper that indicated the level of the coughing. This line went up and down as the coughing level went up and down. What I observed was that while the speaker was dealing with the main points in his outline, the level of coughing was relatively high. When, however, he got specific, either in terms of an illustration or by describing his own personal experience, nine thousand young people stopped coughing! I remember clearly from that experience how attentive the audience became each time the speakers became personal.

They seemed to be unconsciously evaluating the generalized presentation as something that didn't matter much or, at least, as something to which they did not have to devote their whole attention. The specific illustrations and personal experiences, on the other hand, seemed to be evaluated as so important that they should devote their full attention to them. It might be useful to make this kind of observation in church as well. Observations of the level of coughing, fidgeting, clock watching and the like will probably lead you to the same conclusion that I have come to—that specific messages receive greater attention than general messages do.

They are also much more easily applied by the receptors to their own lives. And this seems to be true even if there is a wide gap between the details of what is being presented and the specifics of the experience of those who listen. Even specific experiences of biblical characters seem to be more easily applied than the general principles that are so much in focus in most of the preaching we hear. So, to be perceived as relevant and helpful, be specific to human experience rather than given to logical generalities.

9. Rather than generalizing and predigesting, then, we, like Jesus, need to *lead our receptors to discovery*. As I have mentioned, discovery learning is minimized by many of our American educational and church procedures. When, however, the communicator becomes a real human being, presenting his message in close specific relation to the receptors' felt needs, discovery is enhanced enormously. Case studies, illustrations, specific application to the real life of the hearers, raising questions for which the receptor must struggle for answers, and the like, are all helpful techniques for leading people to discovery.

The matter of the ease with which the receptors can move from material presented to application in their own life is again relevant here. We have been carefully taught that if we can present general principles, our hearers can easily make the applications. I don't believe this is as true as we tend to assume. I think more often we find that communication is most effective when the communicator has presented something rather specific that the receptors find they can relate to, because they discover that the specifics of what he/she is presenting and the specifics of their own experience are rather close to each other. For, as I have said before, it is easier to go from specific to specific than from general to specific. But even if the communication is from general principle to specific application, it will be much more impactful if the receptor discovers how the principle applies to his/her life than if the communicator points it out.

One effective way to lead to discovery is to imitate Jesus' example of raising questions in people's minds. He did this in word (e.g., Mt 22:41–45) and by doing things that caused people to wonder as Nicodemus wondered (Jn 3:2). Some speakers are good at sending people home with questions they are determined to discover answers to. But many of us fail miserably in this area, usually because we want to give the whole answer as we've constructed it

rather than to take the chance that our receptors will construct a different answer. Jesus seemed to opt for his receptors to use their creativity to construct answers that would be maximally meaningful to them.

Attractive personal experience is, however, probably the greatest stimulus to discovery. Some Christians are adept at living their lives in such a way that they become open invitations to others to discover what it is about them that is so attractive. For this to happen, though, our life needs to be visible enough to others for them to see and discover what makes us tick. As Jesus gave himself to the disciples for them to discover who he was and what made his life what it was, so we need to enter into close relationships with those we seek to influence.

10. Through such closeness, then, the communicator can bring the receptors to identify with him and to commit themselves to his/her cause. As we have seen, this is the ultimate impact of effective communication. Jesus did this and we follow him because of it. Now we are to do it and to bring others to follow us as we follow Christ (1 Cor 11:1). Jesus was God's incarnation for his day. Now, in a very real sense we stand in his shoes as God's message incarnated for this day.

If we present our message in the way I've been recommending, our receptors will see both us and our message as vitally related to themselves and their needs. Some of them, then, will choose to identify with us, not only as human beings but as communicators of the message they find transforming their lives as they respond with receptor identification and commitment to our cause. This is an indication that the Holy Spirit has been doing his work, but it is also an indication that we have communicated effectively. And this is our ultimate aim in imitation of the Christ to whom we have responded in identification and commitment to his cause.

Chapter Four

WHAT IS THE RECEPTOR UP TO?

In the preceding chapters I have frequently mentioned receptors and their importance in the communication process. I have suggested that a communicator needs to be receptor oriented. I have also indicated that receptors construct the meanings that result from communicational situations and then respond to those meanings that they construct. It is now time to turn to a more specific focus on the receptors.

The more we learn about the communication process, the more important we discover the receptors are. Whether the communication is a matter of interpersonal interaction, involving life involvement as well as words, or simply through lecture, the receiver of the communication has the final say over what gets across. It is, therefore, crucial that we learn as much as possible about receptors and their activities if we are to become effective communicators.

The term "receptor" is, however, not a good one for those who receive messages. Neither are other possible terms such as "hearers," "audience," "receivers" and the like. For they all connote a high degree of passivity. This is misleading. For receptors never "just sit there" passively as if they are simply taking in everything the communicator dishes out. They are very active in the communication process.

Indeed, communication needs to be seen as a process in which the meanings ultimately perceived by the "receptors" are negotiated. What goes on is a *transaction* the outcome of which is not assured. The participants, then, are in no way passive. They are "interactants." And I would use that term in preference to "receptors" except that 1) it is too cumbersome and 2) it is too broad, since it refers equally to the communicator as to the receptor. We will, therefore, continue to use the term receptor and attempt to alert ourselves to the very active posture of such people in the communication process.

It is important to note, further, that in this transactional process, receptors are not compelled to interpret according to the desires of the initiator of the communication process. If there is mutual trust and goodwill, it is likely that things will go as the communicator intends. If not, the receptor may well put a negative connotation on anything his/her communication partner suggests. So building or maintaining goodwill and trust should be a high priority for the one who seeks to communicate effectively. Learning as much as possible about who and where our receptors are should, then, enhance our ability to act and speak into situations in which we are likely to be correctly interpreted.

The Context within Which Receptors Operate

It is important initially to paint the backdrop for the picture we are about to develop. For receptors exist in contexts. They do not simply float around freely waiting for people to come along with messages for them. Every communication is directed into a context and needs to be formulated in such a way that that context is taken seriously. To put this another way, to be receptor oriented requires that one take seriously the frame of reference within which the receptor lives.

Much has already been said on this topic. But there are a few aspects that can be sharpened at this point.

1. Receptors are parts of reference groups. Receptors (like all humans) are never alone, even when they are "by themselves." Whether one lives in an individualistic society like we Americans do or in a strongly group-oriented society like those of most of the Two-Thirds World, we always consider others when we make decisions. Whenever an appeal is made to us to consider a change of opinion or behavior, our basic question is, What will the people in my group think?

The important people we consider at such times are called our "reference group" or our "significant others." They may be members of our family, close friends, neighbors, members of our social class, church associates, those with whom we work or even ancestors or others no longer living. There is a sense in which their opinions live within our minds and exert pressure on us to conform to what we think they would want. Our understandings of those opinions have often contributed in important ways to our self-image. Thus, going against what we believe they expect of us can cause serious disruption in the way we view ourselves. Rather than disrupt our self-image, then, we often refuse to change our attitudes or behavior, even if the arguments for change are quite persuasive.

Sometimes we are influenced by more than one reference group. On occasion, we find ourselves pulled in two directions at once by different groups of which we are a part. Many people are, for example, committed to a church group whose influence pulls them in one direction while their commitment to their colleagues at the place where they work pulls them in quite a different direction. Or people at an evangelistic rally may find themselves pulled in one direction by the mood of that group but strongly hindered from moving in that direction by the conservatism of their family or some other important reference group. Wise evangelists understand this phenomenon and attempt to assist converts to develop strong relationships with a Christian group within which the convert will receive the strength and encouragement he/she needs to resist the social pressure within his/her own mind to return to conformity with the previous reference group.

An important part of the context within which receptors operate, then, is the fact that all humans are related to reference groups whose opinions strongly affect the choices they make. Any change a person contemplates and/or carries out is, therefore, made in relation to the person's perception of the desires of such a group. If the person feels his/her reference group is likely to react negatively to a given decision, it is probable that the person will turn away from that decision. Or the person may make the decision, later discover that his/her group is against it and go back on the decision.

Groups will usually allow their members a certain amount of freedom to change in areas not valued highly by the group. They will, however, often be quite intolerant of change in areas such as basic values, allegiances and beliefs. Often they will penalize any of their members who change in such areas by refusing to associate with them any longer, effectively ending their membership in the group. For many of the peoples of the world, however, the right to change in areas considered important to the group while still retaining membership in the group will only be allowed if the opinion leaders in the group are also won over to the idea. If this happens, the opinion leaders may either lead the whole group to make the change or open things up so that some are allowed to change even though others do not, with little or no social penalty for either choice.

If, then, one is to be an effective communicator, he/she must take seriously the reference group(s) of which the receptor(s) is/ are a part. It is important to discover what that group stands for and how great its influence in the receptor(s) life. If that group is very important to the receptor, one should consider a strategy that would seek to win the whole group in order that the convert will be maximally at home in his/her new life within the same group. If the receptor needs to leave the old reference group, then, he/she needs to be carefully and solidly made a part of a new group within which he/she can grow and mature in the new convictions and behavior. This group should ordinarily contain several others who are at about the same level of growth as the newcomer, understanding where he/she is in the growth process and, therefore, sharing with him/her in the same aspects of the process. One or two young Christians seldom survive in groups made up of older Christians who no longer clearly remember their early struggles.

2. Implicit in this discussion of reference groups is the fact that receptors are already committed to groups and to values. When approaches are made to people to make changes in their attitudes and/or behavior, it cannot be assumed that they are not already committed to competing attitudes and/or behavior. People do not operate in a vacuum. People not only exist in groups, they are committed to those groups and for what they stand for. We do not,

therefore, invite people from positions of no commitment to a given commitment, but from one set of commitments to another set of commitments.

In Christian communication, furthermore, we are not dealing with mere surface level commitments. We are seeking to lead people to seek first the presence of God and to put his requirements of them as their top priority (Mt 6:33). We all have many commitments, such as family, occupation, self, friends, God, a hobby, organizations, material objects, values and the like. God wants us to put him first. We may and should continue to be committed to most of the other things in our lives. But none of them should be above our commitment to God.

For many, however, putting God first will involve considerable change. For their primary commitment may have been to self, family, occupation or something else. The intensity of the commitment a person feels to whatever has been in first place will be an important factor in any attempt to reorient priorities. One not intensely committed to something such as occupation, self or family, for example, may more easily make an all-out commitment to God than one whose commitment to something else is rather total. Wise communicators attempt to assess the intensity of such commitments and seek ways to appeal for re-prioritizing that will be as attractive as possible to the receptor(s).

People are usually more open to changes that appeal to their own self-interest. Apparently none of us have entirely pure motivations. If a new commitment can be presented in such a way that the receptors feel their positions in life will be improved if they make that change, they are likely to be more open to it—that is, if it isn't perceived to cost them too much socially. Christianity, of course, offers quite a number of good things that can appeal to receptors' self-interest if presented rightly. May people are looking for such Christian benefits as more meaningful life, peace, forgiveness, freedom from compulsions, release from physical, emotional or spiritual captivities and the like, not to mention eternal life. To appeal attractively for people to give up previous commitments to gain these benefits is one of the greatest challenges of the Christian communicator.

3. If Christian appeals are to be attractive to such communicators, we need to return to the subject of *felt needs*. Since, however, we have already spent some space on this issue (see section 7 on relevance in the previous chapter), we will not need to develop it fully here. Suffice it to say that human beings never seem to be fully satisfied with whatever their state in life. And no sociocultural system seems to adequately provide for every need felt by the people within that system. Those left-over problems, therefore, provide fertile ground for any communicator prepared to discover and provide answers for them.

Like Jesus, we are to allow receptors to articulate their need (e.g., the rich young man of Mt 19:16–22; blind Bartimaeus in Mk 10:46–52 and the Samaritan woman of Jn 4). We then can deal with whatever the receptor is conscious of and thus gain his/her permission to deal with the deeper needs that may be on our agenda. Without the rapport either granted immediately by the receptor (e.g., Jesus with Nicodemus in Jn 3) or that gained by dealing with the more conscious needs, though, we should not attempt to probe deeper unless, like Jesus with the Pharisees in Matthew 23, our object is to anger rather than to win.

The appeal to needs perceived by receptors is a crucial dimension of effective communication. We cannot, however, assume that those we seek to reach understand life in exactly the same way we understand it. That is, they may feel "itches" at places where we don't and not feel them at places where we do. If, then, we appeal to them on the assumption that they perceive the same needs we do, we are likely to "scratch them where they don't itch," and to miss "scratching them where they do itch." We need, therefore, to do whatever research is necessary, especially if we are working crossculturally, to discover where our receptors are and what they perceive their needs to be before we attempt to speak to them. Only when we have a fair idea of what they see to be their unanswered problems, should we seek to discover how to apply scriptural answers to them. Merely applying even scriptural answers to questions they are not asking seldom works well.

Receptors Are Active

Within their contexts, then, receptors are active in their responses to whatever is communicated. As pointed out above, they simply are not passive. They are "interactants," not like sponges, simply soaking up the messages that are sent their way. If we try to analyze our own activity as we converse with someone or sit in the audience listening to a lecture or sermon, we begin to realize that we are anything but passive. Indeed, as we interact with someone in conversation, we may find that often we are not listening as we should to what the other person is saying. We are too busy constructing what we are going to say in response. Or as we sit listening to a lecture we may find that our thoughts are miles away or that we are arguing in our head against the speaker rather than simply listening to him/her.

Even when we are trying our best to be attentive, however, the fact is that there are many things going on at the same time in any communicational situation. At any given time when we are listening to a speaker, we may be more concerned with how he/she is saying something than with what is being said. Or we may be more focused in on the looks of the speaker than we are on what he/she is saying. Or we may be more concerned with the person next to us or with someone else in the audience than we are either with the message or the messenger.

Those of us who have listened to countless sermons and lectures may, in fact, have gotten into the habit of picking the message apart as it is delivered. I have spent my time in any number of sermons and lectures doing just that. In fact, there is probably not a sermon or a lecture that I cannot find something wrong with, especially if I don't want to be listening to it in the first place. (I have, however, now made a deal with myself to use my analytical powers always to discover something good in sermons, rather than picking them apart. This has helped me enormously to get something beneficial out of every preaching situation, no matter how poor the sermon may be. I recommend it!)

When we are listening intently to the communication, we are interacting with everything that is said and are, therefore, anything

but passive. For as we listen, we consider what is being said in various ways. Some things we respond to enthusiastically. Some with a "ho-hum." Some messages we try to avoid. Some we object to. If our attitude toward the speaker is positive, however, we make allowances, even when we are not positive toward certain of the things he/she is saying.

Communication requires active involvement of those to whom the messages are directed as well as of those who originate them. This means that receptors are active whether or not they are doing much speaking and whether they are accepting, rejecting, or attempting to avoid what is being said or done.

There are, however, many dimensions to this activity. Among them are the following:

1. Receptors are always interpreting. And this interpretation is wholistic. That is, everything about the communicational situation gets interpreted. The communicator's words are, of course, interpreted. But so are his/her tone of voice, gestures, use of space, general appearance and the like. If the communicator reminds the receptor of anyone, this also becomes part of the interpretation. So does the physical state of the receptor (e.g., if he/she isn't feeling well), as well as the physical setting in which the interaction takes place. Some physical settings feel warm, others feel cold. In addition, the receiver of communication will interpret, largely unconsciously, such things as the degree of formality, the degree of personalness and hundreds of other factors.

Interpretation is clearly one of the most important, though least conscious of the activities of receptors. And most of it is based on what the receptor has learned through past experience, rather than on his/her experience in the present situation. In order to be effective, then, communicators need to learn as much as possible about the influence of such factors on the process of communication and to adjust whatever they say and do in any given situation to turn such factors to their benefit rather than to their detriment.

2. These interpretations feed directly into the most important of the receptors' activities, that of constructing the meanings that

result from the communicational interaction. Older theories of communication saw communicators simply putting together and passing along words and phrases that contain their meanings. It was thought that if the receptor did not understand what was being said, it was because he/she did not understand the meanings of the words and phrases employed. So, according to these older theories, all the receptor needs to do to arrive at the intended meanings is to find out the proper meanings of the words and phrases. For, these theories contend, the meanings lie in the message itself.

Recent communication theory, however, has abandoned that rather mechanical view of communication in favor of a more personalistic view. Contemporary understandings contend that a major difference between messages and meanings lies in the fact that messages can be transmitted in linguistic form while meanings exist only in the hearts and minds of people. Contemporary communicologists see communicators with meanings in their minds that they would like to transmit to receptors. Communicators take these meanings and formulate them, usually in linguistic form, into messages that they then transmit to receptors. Receptors, then, listen to the messages and construct within their minds sets of meanings that may or may not correspond with the meanings intended by the communicator.

It is not meanings that pass from me to you, only messages. Meanings exist only within persons, within me and within you. They are constructed by receptors on the basis of *their* interpretations of the words, deeds and other communicational symbols employed, whether or not these interpretations correspond with those intended by the communicator. Meaning is a personal thing, involving the receptor in the activity of attaching meanings that he/she creates to the symbols used by the communicator. Meaning is not, therefore, a function of language or any other vehicle of communication. I have certain meanings in my mind that I would like to get across. I try to formulate these into messages, whether verbal, behavioral, written or in some other form. In the case of this book I am formulating my meanings via writing. You, then, read my messages and construct within your mind the meaning that you consider to be appropriate to the messages that I am sending.

If you are positively disposed toward me and my messages, it is likely that you will construct meanings that are at least favorable toward what I am trying to say. You might still misunderstand what I am saying, but you are likely to give me the benefit of the doubt. If, on the other hand, you are negative toward me and/or my messages, you are likely to attach unfavorable meanings to the messages that I send whether or not you understand them. The messages, then, serve as *stimulators* rather than as containers. Receptors in response to the stimulus of messages construct meanings that may or may not correspond to what the communicator intended.

This particular insight is highly significant to all of us who seek to communicate effectively. It means that if I am going to get across to you I am automatically accountable both for the way I construct the message and for the impact of that construction upon you. This means that I am accountable to understand as much as I possibly can concerning how you are likely to receive my messages. And this relates strongly to your previous experience with messages of this kind. If I know you, I am able to predict with a fair degree of accuracy how you will respond. If, however, I do not know you, my ability to predict your response may be severely hampered.

Whether or not you know me or someone like me will also have an important influence on what you come away with from this book. Suppose, for example, I speak or write like someone with whom you have had a bad experience. The meanings that you construct from my messages are going to be affected by that fact. And the ultimate verdict concerning what results from the communicational situation will be affected by circumstances largely beyond my control.

I can present you with information in the best way I know how. But if I don't really know you, the way I present that information can be based only on my best guess as to where you might be and how this type of presentation might affect you. I will try to use words, phrases, and the like that you will both understand and toward which you will be positively disposed in order that you will give my messages at least the benefit of the doubt. But I may not guess right. Or, I might naively employ terminology that I happen to like but that raises red flags in your mind.

I once was in an audience being addressed by a prestigious person for whom the word "liberal" (meaning theologically liberal) had a very positive connotation. He spoke of the glories of being theologically liberal. The impact on me was totally negative. I thought he should be ashamed of himself and repent for such an attitude!

I suspect that the audience to which I am now writing would be strongly inclined to be negative both toward me and toward my message if I tried to use that word in a positive sense. If, on the other hand, I identify myself as a theological "conservative" (which I am), my guess is that the audience to which I am writing would take a positive attitude toward me and my message. In either case, the communication that I seek to get across is affected to a greater extent by the meanings that you the audience attach to the words and phrases that I employ than it is by the meanings that I attach to those symbols. And if I don't realize what is going on, it would be very easy for me to stimulate in your minds meanings that are quite distant from the meanings that I intend.

The importance of this particular fact in communicational situations was once driven home to me in a way that I cannot forget. I was asked by a very conservative church to give a series of Wednesday evening lectures on the subject of Bible Translation. As near as I could tell the first lecture was received quite well. But when I appeared the next week for the second lecture, I was informed by the leader of the group that some of the people were complaining about me because I did not use the phrase "the blood of Christ" in my lecture the previous week. Indeed I had not used that phrase. So I explained to the leader that the reason was that the phrase had not been appropriate to my subject matter. I had not, like some speakers this group had been exposed to, refused to use that phrase because I was against the concept of the sacrificial work of Christ. His reply was that he well understood my point of view but he asked that I look for an opportunity to insert that phrase somewhere in my discussion this week, so that those who raised the objection would accept what I was trying to say.

What was going on in that situation was a crisis of credibility based on the insecurity of certain of the group who did not know which meanings to attach to what I was saying. They were not sure whether they should construct meanings that they considered orthodox or meanings that they considered liberal from my message. They did not know me and were not sure about my credibility. So their message to me was, "Please provide us with word symbols that enable us to construct meanings of trust in our minds. The use of the phrase, 'blood of Christ' would do it." I took their request seriously and provided them with a fairly detailed personal testimony—an alternate and more effective symbol that enabled them to attach the meaning "orthodoxy" to my messages. After that they all relaxed and we had a good series of interactions.

Understanding, then, is a matter of the way people attach meanings to the symbols used in communication. And this is a primary activity of receptors. Understanding or misunderstanding is achieved by the activity of receptors attaching particular meanings—both denotative and connotative—to the symbols via which the message is presented. Those symbols: the words, phrases, sentences, etc., in which the messages are couched, are not, therefore, like box cars that carry the same meaning wherever they go. They are more like darts, thrown to prick people at certain points in order to stimulate in them certain kinds of responses.

People communicating in the same language do, of course, usually attach largely similar meanings to the same words, phrases, etc. This is because as parts of a single linguistic community, they have all been taught to attach similar meanings to the same symbols. But even within the same community there is a greater or lesser range of variation in the meanings that various members of the community attach to the words they use. There is very seldom, if ever, a complete correspondence between the meanings in the head of the communicator and the meanings in the heads of the receptors. The approximations may, however, be fairly close and the communication quite adequate, in spite of the lack of a total correspondence between the communicators' meanings and the receptors' meanings.

In any event, it is crucial for the communicator to recognize that the receptor is active in the process of meaning construction and to do everything he can do to assure that the receptors' activity in this respect will be closer to, rather than farther from, what the communicator intends.

3. A third important activity engaged in by receptors is the granting or withholding of permission for any given message to enter what might be termed the receptor's "communicational space." Receptors may be pictured as encased in a kind of bubble which only they can give permission to enter. When someone wants to transact or negotiate some form of communication, then, he/she says or does something to attempt to gain permission for the interaction from the one who can control access to that bubble.

"Hello" is a word designed to negotiate entrance into the other's communicational space. The other may, then, respond and give permission or ignore the request. There are quite a variety of other words and gestures (some with the eyes) also used to give such permission. Answering the telephone, turning on a radio or TV set and reading a book are common acts that allow both friends and strangers to enter one's communicational space.

The transactional nature of communication requires that each participant gain the permission of the other in order to either initiate or continue the interaction. The attitude of the participants toward each other is, of course, crucial to the nature of the interaction. Permission may, for example, be more readily given to persons of higher prestige than oneself, to persons whom one trusts, to those in authority over oneself, to those with greater expertise than oneself, to those whose favor one seeks, to those whom one perceives as interested in oneself and the like. Often apparently trivial things can play a big part, for example, the language (even accent), appearance or personalness of the communicator, the mood or health of the receptor at the time or the physical setting in which the communication takes place. Larger concerns such as the receptors' felt needs and the intelligibility of what is communicated are, of course, also very important.

To some communicators, blanket permission will be granted by given receptors to send messages on any subject. From others, however, only messages on certain subjects will be accepted. In many situations, the receptor listens to the messages but reserves the right to evaluate and accept or reject them at a later time. The timing and setting in which a message occurs also influences the receptor's acceptance or rejection of the message. Certain messages may be accepted in church but rejected in the workplace by given receptors. In any event, whether or not a receptor grants or withholds permission for a message to enter his/her communicational space relates to such factors as his/her evaluation of the sender, the setting and the subject matter of the messages offered.

Whether or not a receptor grants permission for a message to enter also relates to what may be termed the "range of tolerance" of that receptor for the particular type of message presented and/ or for the person presenting the message. In the example given above, the receptors I was addressing concerning Bible translation had no tolerance for any message they judged to advocate liberal doctrines. Nor were they disposed to give permission for anything controversial that I might say until they were assured I was not theologically liberal. When, however, they were assured that I was not liberal in my theological understandings, their range of tolerance for even certain controversial things concerning Bible translation expanded considerably. Since, however, many of them had very definite ideas concerning that subject, there were certain ideas they would not accept even though they had granted me credibility and accepted my expertise.

A communicator needs to give high priority to the winning of the permission of his/her receptors. Once permission is gained, however, it is not certain that it will be retained until the end of the communication. For receptors evaluate as the interaction continues (see below) and sometimes take back permission once granted before the event is over. Sometimes such withdrawal can be read in the receptors' behavior as feedback.

4. Closely related to the activity of giving permission is that of evaluating the message. It is apparently a basic of our humanity that we not only participate in experiences but we evaluate them. In a communication experience then, we evaluate each component of that experience, including the communicator (whether someone else or ourselves), the message, and the receptors. If we are the receptors in a given situation, we constantly evaluate the message in relation to

ourselves, including our past experiences, our present experiences and whatever we are projecting for ourselves in the future.

We also evaluate the situation in which the communication takes place totally. We evaluate such aspects as place, time, other persons involved, manner of dress of the participants, the temperature, the arrangement of persons, furniture and other accouterments, and all other features of the communicational situation. From this evaluation we construct an overall impression of the situation. This overall impression then, has much to do with how we interpret what goes on in that situation. We react differently, then, in a situation we evaluate positively from the way we act in a similar situation we evaluate negatively or neutrally. There are, furthermore, situations in which our impression is strongly positive or strongly negative, while in other situations we are only mildly positive or mildly negative.

In addition to evaluating the total situation, however, we constantly evaluate each part of the situation. Indeed we may find ourselves positively disposed to a total situation but negatively disposed towards certain of the people in that situation, certain of the messages communicated in that situation, or even our own participation in the situation. In any event, receptors certainly are not passive in communicational situations. We evaluate every aspect of all situations in which we participate and this is one primary form of activity in which we engage as receptors.

- 5. Another closely related kind of activity in which receptors are engaged is the matter of *selectivity*. Receptors are selective in at least four areas.
- 1) The first of these is in the kinds of things one will allow oneself to be exposed to. Those of you who are reading this have chosen to be exposed to it. There are probably many others who glanced at this material and decided not to expose themselves to it. In our everyday lives we are constantly selecting those things that we want to be exposed to and those things that we do not want to be exposed to.

There are, of course, many reasons why we choose to expose ourselves to certain things but not to others. Not infrequently, the

choice to expose ourselves to some things relates more to our desire to please someone else than it does to our interest in that to which we expose ourselves. On the other hand, this book may be assigned by a professor, in which case we are required to "choose" it. But whatever the reason the fact is that receptors are active in choosing what they will expose themselves to communicationally.

2) Not infrequently, though, we find ourselves in a position where we are exposed to communications that we would rather not be exposed to. Sometimes our spouses, or children or friends drag us to some communicational event against our wills. Or, we may have to attend something because it is required by our job, our role, or some social involvement in which we find ourselves. At times like these we have another kind of activity that we can employ as receptors. That is selectivity of attention.

We may not be able to avoid being exposed to given messages, but we may find it possible to only pay attention to certain parts of those messages. We may sort of blip in and blip out while the communication is taking place. Or we may allow ourselves to get easily distracted by something else that is going on. Either way, we pay attention only to certain aspects of the communication. Sometimes we are so inattentive that we mentally go off into a distant land or even fall asleep. At such times selective attention comes quite close to selective exposure.

3) A third area in which receptors exercise selectivity is in the area of perception. It is not always possible to avoid exposure or even to avoid paying some attention to the message. But we tend to perceive messages in such a way that they confirm already held positions, whether or not the communicator intended them that way. This is usually done unconsciously and relates to our overall evaluation of the situation and the various components of it. One person with a given attitude toward a communicational situation may perceive and even distort the message in one way while another person in the same situation, but with a different evaluation of it, will perceive or distort it in quite another direction.

Whether or not we understand the message also plays an important part. The perception that we take away from a communicational

situation may be distorted as much by partial understanding or even misunderstanding as it is by our evaluation. Whether, then, because our evaluation or because of our understanding, we are consciously or unconsciously selective in our perception of the messages that we hear.

Our intention when we go into a communicational situation likewise has much to do with what we perceive from that situation. If for example, we go into a situation seeking comfort or distraction or entertainment, we are likely to come away from that situation having gotten what we came for but missing whatever else the communicator might have intended. Or, if we go into a situation with high expectations concerning what we will obtain but find nothing to meet those expectations, we may well go away from that situation totally disappointed because our expectations were not met while having missed many valuable things that we could have obtained had we been less selective in our perception.

4) The fourth area in which receptors are selective is in the area of recall. On occasion, we may be exposed to a message, pay attention to it, and even perceive it correctly, but when we remember back to that occasion at a later date, we may choose to remember only a certain selection of the things that we actually heard. This choice is usually made in terms of those things that fit in most easily with the things that we already believed and felt. Our focus gets fixed on the things that fit we already feel.

For example, if one has a positive attitude towards oneself and the communicator says things that fit in with that positive attitude (no matter what else he/she says), the person may well remember only those things. If, on the other hand, one has a negative attitude towards oneself, and the communicator says things that fit in with that predisposition, it is likely that he/she will recall those things, even if the communicator also says many things that are contrary to this predisposition. I will develop this point further in the next section. Suffice it to say, that in at least these four ways receptors engage in the activity of selection in communicational events.

6. Receiving communication is a risky business. Receptors are, therefore, continually seeking to maintain their equilibrium in the

face of such actual or imagined risk. As we read this, or as we sit listening to a communicator speak, we may have little conscious awareness of the risk factor. And yet, whenever we expose ourselves to communication we are risking the possibility that we might have to change some aspect of our lives. We ordinarily seek at all costs to maintain our present equilibrium, to protect ourselves from assimilating anything that will upset our psychological balance.

To do this we often build walls around ourselves in such a way that we can shed anything we hear that would put pressure on us to change our lifestyle. By means of the selectivity of which we have been talking, we can refuse to take seriously whatever we choose to ignore. We may refuse to process information, to be concerned about it, to see the implications of such information for our lives. Or, even if we do see the implications, we may refuse to work such insights into our lives. One thing we often do, of course, is to apply what we hear to someone else's life in order to avoid having to take it seriously ourselves.

These strategies that we use are often referred to as "coping strategies." A coping strategy is a way of dealing with the threats that come to our equilibrium from such sources as ambiguity, unanswered questions, and incomplete assimilation of new information. In school, of course, we are bombarded with so much information that we learn well how to cope with information overload by shedding most of it. We may learn enough of it well enough to pass whatever examinations we have to face, but we develop the habit of refusing to process it.

We also learn, however, to defend ourselves against much of the information that we do process. The so called "critical thinking," that we are taught to employ is often no more than defensive thinking, designed more to protect us from considering new ideas than to evaluate those ideas in terms of their potential value to us. We learn to say, "yes but ...," to nearly all new ideas in order to minimize the risk to our psychological equilibrium that a serious consideration of new ideas would entail.

Note what frequently happens, in this regard, when we listen to someone speak. If they are on the other side of an experience gap from us, we may protect ourselves from risk by saying to ourselves as they speak, "Yes, but he doesn't understand where I am." If the communicator has a status such as preacher, teacher, or someone else we regard as having "made it," we may say to ourselves, "Yes, but he doesn't have to face what I have to face." If the speaker seems to be dealing with a complex issue at a fairly superficial level, we may avoid the risk of taking him seriously by saying to ourselves, "Yes, but he has terribly oversimplified things."

If the communicator increases the risk by keeping good eye contact with his receptors, the latter may use various strategies to keep from having to look the communicator in the eye. In these and similar ways, receptors are very active in attempting to reduce the risk involved in communication situations. Even agreeing with people without seriously considering what they say may be a coping strategy engaged in by some to avoid or reduce the risk factor in communication.

7. In addition to these kinds of activity, receptors are constantly involved in the production and transmission of what is called "feedback." As the communicator speaks, his/her receptors attempt to do some communicating of their own as they respond by sending messages back to the communicator. These messages, or feedback, serve various purposes in the communicational interaction. Often the receptor wants to encourage the communicator. He/she may, therefore, smile, nod, make some short comment or in some other way show approval of what the communicator is saying. On the other hand, receptors often want to provide the communicator with negative feedback. In English speaking situations we often shake our heads, frown, or make short negative comments to provide negative feedback. In other societies feedback may be sent in ways quite different from the ways employed in English speaking contexts.

Very often feedback is transmitted in ways even the one who sends it may be quite unconscious of. As receptors we may fidget, cough, show rapt attention, either seek or avoid eye contact, or in other ways unconsciously send feedback to communicators. Sometimes, indeed, as receptors we carry on a rather full internal conversation with the communicator of which he/she is completely

unaware. Whatever of this surfaces in such a way that the communicator can read it becomes feedback.

The constructing, sending and receiving of feedback in communicational situations is a rather intricate business. Often receptors construct and send a good bit of feedback that is not picked up by the communicator. If, for example, the communicator has been brought up in such a way that he/she has not learned to read the particular feedback that the receptors construct and send, there can be a considerable amount of miscommunication.

Often, in our society, men and women are trained into quite different feedback systems. It is not uncommon for a woman to send large amounts of feedback that are never picked up by the men with whom she associates. Often such feedback is constructed in rather elaborate "hints" that are not responded to by fellows. Those who construct and send feedback, therefore, must also be receptor oriented, in the sense that they must be careful to send the kind of feedback that is intelligible to their receptors, if they are to be correctly understood.

8. The final type of receptor activity with which I would like to deal is that of *coming to a verdict* concerning the communication. The receptor needs to do something about the communication. He/she has to decide whether to act on the communication or to ignore it. If the communication simply involves information, as with a news broadcast, he/she needs to decide whether to try to remember it or to simply forget it. If the communicator is appealing for a change in behavior, the receptor needs to decide whether to respond positively, negatively or neutrally to that appeal. Whatever the decision the receptor comes to concerning the communication, some kind of a verdict, some kind of a judgment is involved.

Suppose the verdict is to ignore some sort of persuasive communication. The receptor may decide to judge that the communication is directed to someone else, or that the communication should be regarded as a performance rather than as an appeal, or that he/she is already behaving in the recommended way. Any of these, or other decisions with respect to communication, qualify as verdicts made by the receptor.

One of the verdicts that we often make in classroom situations is what to do with the notes we take on the lectures that we hear. We recognize that we cannot possibly remember all of the things presented, so we choose to record some of the more important things on paper. Then we have to decide what we do with the notes. We are often helped by our professors to use those notes at least one more time to review for examinations. But after that, we must decide whether to store them in our files or not, and if we store them, when and how often to consult them.

If the communication has been of a persuasive nature, such as much of Christian communication is supposed to be, the receptor has to decide whether or not to identify with the communicator and if so whether or not to commit him/herself to the cause of the communicator. As I have suggested in previous chapters, the ultimate impact of Christian communication is achieved when receptors decide to identify with the communicator and to commit themselves to his/her cause. This is the kind of verdict we are after as Christian communicators, whether we are speaking evangelistically or attempting to bring about growth toward maturity on the part of the receptor.



Chapter Five

HOW DOES MEANING HAPPEN?

How to explain the way(s) in which humans arrive at meaning is a problem that has challenged philosophers, language specialists and just about anyone else who thinks deeply from time immemorial. Lately, a relatively new discipline called communication theory, communication science or communicology has drawn from several academic streams to provide some promising insights into the problem.

In the preceding chapters, various statements have been made concerning meaning that presupposed the position taken in this chapter. Here we will discuss that position in greater detail. It will soon become evident that if this understanding of meaning is taken seriously by Christian communicators, the shape of our approach to communication in the churches will have to be drastically changed.

Traditional Theories of Meaning?

People often assume that figuring out what things mean is fairly easy. You just look or listen and the meaning of what you are seeing or hearing usually comes automatically. Some things have to be worked out. But most of the time the meanings just come naturally.

Such thinking has led to one or the other of two simplistic understandings of how meaning comes to us:

1. The first assumes that meaning is either self-evident or readily available to those who analyze the objects and events of life. Somehow meaning is inherent in the things we see and hear and is given

out to people as they experience and/or analyze these things. There is, these people assume, one correct meaning to mountains, accidents and all other elements of life that those who reflect a bit will come to unless their ability to observe and interpret is faulty.

This position is akin to the belief that objective reality is clearly visible to and easily interpretable by all. And my understanding of it is the correct one. If one disagrees with my interpretation of reality, therefore, he/she is wrong. The way I, or my group, sees God, the Bible, the world, politics, child rearing and the multitude of other things in life is considered absolute. This is truth and I have the right to be dogmatic about it. All other views are simply wrong.

Arguments against this theory point out that if the phenomena and events of life contained their own meanings, it would be possible for anyone in any society to uncover the same meaning. This does not seem to happen, however, even for people of different backgrounds within the same society. Though there seem to be similar broad general guidelines for classification of reality to which most of the peoples of the world adhere (rocks and people, for example, are seldom regarded as basically similar), the more impressive fact is that people interpret according to the cultural patterns of their group. And such interpretations and the patterns on which they are based differ, sometimes widely, from group to group.

Even within American society, for example, the meaning attributed to a landscape, a sunset, or a flower is not always the same. Native participants in many societies, though, consider it strange that an American would refer to either a landscape or a sunset as beautiful and little short of insane that he/she would lavish attention on anything as bothersome as a flower. Perhaps they (or we) are simply wrong in our interpretations, and there is, in fact, an inherent meaning to each aspect of the external world. More probably though, external phenomena should be looked on as not demanding any given interpretation. Their interpretation is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder. And it is from such a human interpretive process, based on social agreements concerning how the elements of life are to be seen, not from the phenomena themselves, that the meanings come.

2. A second position recognizes that the interpretations people give to the reality around them are not given by that reality. Rather, people observe that reality and describe it in words. These words (or other symbols), then, are seen as containing the meanings people live by.

This theory as applied to language is referred to in chapter three as the "boxcar theory" of word meanings. Words, gestures, and other symbols are seen as containers full of meaning that are simply used by communicators to pass along that meaning to receptors. Interpretation, then, is the job of studying the words and/or other symbols of a message to discover the meaning. This is the view of many Bible students who see their task as the impersonal process of studying the history of the words and phrases making up any given text to extract their meanings. These words are considered to virtually have a life of their own. Differences in interpretation, then, are due to a lack of knowledge of the history of these "containers."

This theory is subject to a criticism similar to that of the first. In studying how meaning is arrived at we note that there is divergence, sometimes wide divergence, in the way in which various people interpret the same symbols. There is, furthermore, change, sometimes great change, from generation to generation in the meanings attached to any given word, phrase, or other symbol employed for communicational purposes. Though there are limits imposed on the area of meaning that any given symbol can cover, these limits seem to be imposed by the community who uses them rather than by something inherent in the symbols themselves. English speakers once agreed, for example, that the word let referred to "hindering" (see the KJV translation of Rom 1:13 and 2 Th 2:7), whereas now they agree that it refers to "allowing." Likewise, within contemporary America some groups freely practice hugging and kissing between members of the opposite sex as an expression of concern, care, and love. Other groups, however, interpret such activity always as an expression of sexual attraction. It is necessary to distinguish between the data of experience (in this case the data consists of the symbols that we use in communication) and the interpretation of that data. Meaning proceeds from the latter rather than being inherent in the former.

Meaning Exists in Persons

Most contemporary communication theorists advocate a more person-oriented theory of meaning. They hold that meanings lie within people, not in either the external world or in the symbols we use to describe that world. Meaning is seen as a personal thing, internal to persons rather than either a part of the world outside or of the symbols people use. Meanings, being personal, are attached by people to message symbols according to cultural rules in their minds.

This point of view is well stated by Berlo (1960:175) when he says:

Meanings are in people, [they are] covert responses, contained within the human organism. Meanings . . . are personal, our own property. We learn meanings, we add to them, we distort them, forget them, change them. We cannot find them. They are in us, not in messages. Fortunately, we usually find other people who have meanings that are similar to ours. To the extent that people have similar meanings, they can communicate. If they have no similarities in meaning between them, they cannot communicate.

The elements and structure of a language do not themselves have meaning. They are only symbols, sets of symbols, cues that cause us to bring our own meanings into play, to think about them, to rearrange them, etc. Communication does not consist of the transmission of meaning. Meanings are not transmittable, not transferable. Only messages are transmittable, and meanings are not in the message, they are in the message-users.

Meaning is the result of interpretation. And interpretation is the subjective interaction of one or more persons with a situation. What that situation means to the person is what he/she comes away with from that situation. And persons attach their meanings indepen-

dently of each other, though ordinarily in keeping with habits that they have learned to share with other members of their community.

We ordinarily interpret habitually, according to the "interpretational reflexes" that have been carefully taught to us by our elders. And this fact lends an air of predictability between people of the same community. At times, though, we (or others) interpret creatively rather than reflexively. And this fact brings uncertainty into situations that otherwise might be quite predictable. In ordinary speech, for example, we expect and depend on reflexive interpretation. In humor, however, the communicator must often guide the receptor to interpret creatively if the latter is to get the joke.

Even within the same language, people of different communities often assign different meanings to the same symbols. How many American girls, for example, have been taken aback by being referred to in England as "homely." In order to counter her interpretational reflexes, an American would have to know that the British use that word as a compliment (roughly equivalent to the American "homey"). A similar situation exists closer to home between members of groups who have opposite attitudes toward and, therefore, assign opposite values to concepts like liberalism, socialized medicine, abortion, church, people of a given ethnic group, and a myriad of other topics.

The fact that we interpret reflexively has both a good and a bad side to it. The good side is that it saves energy. As receptors, we do most of our interpreting with very little consciousness of the fact that we are interpreting, or of the energy we may be expending in the process. We can interpret without thinking about it. On the other hand, the habitual nature of interpretation means that we frequently jump to conclusions without considering carefully whether they are at all likely to correspond with the intention of the communicator.

Learning to understand a person from another group is, therefore, a matter of learning the group agreements in terms of which he/she attaches meanings to the symbols used. Once those agreements are learned, the receptor/interpreter has developed a second set of habits in terms of which to interpret. This set of habits can then, be

employed whenever he/she is interacting with any member of that communicator's group.

If the attachment of meaning is a matter of cultural habit, it is obvious that one's cultural training has an important influence on those interpretations. Subcultural groupings such as social class, family, occupational group, others with whom one associates, and the like also have an important influence. Such groupings share certain values and reject others. A conservative group will, for example, tend to interpret similarly in areas touching their particular concerns. Any such group will, however, conserve energy by focusing in on certain key (token) issues while ignoring others that may ultimately be just as important to them. Agreement, usually, though not always, rooted in training is the crucial factor that leads members of a group to interpret similarly.

When we attempt to analyze a communicational situation, the, we need to ask what is going on interpretationally. What meanings are being attached to which items by which participants? What, for example, is the communicator's attitude toward his/her respondent? What is the respondent's attitude toward the communicator? And what is the attitude of either toward the message, the setting, the language, the style? The receptor's attitude toward each of these factors plus his/her interpretation of the message will figure prominently in the way the meanings are attached to the symbols employed.

Cultural Forms and Personal Meanings

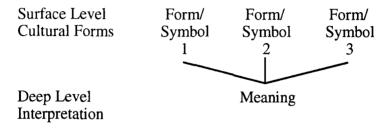
If we are to properly understand the concept of meaning, it is important to deal with the anthropological concept of the *relationship between cultural forms and meanings*. We have said that meanings are personal. They are, therefore, at a deep level in the communication process. What we see at the surface level in the process of communication is what we call cultural forms or symbols. These are the carriers of the messages people send. There is no interpersonal communication except through cultural forms or symbols.

The forms of a culture or language are the elements of which it is made up. Many cultural forms are material items such as houses, trees, dogs, persons, chairs, automobiles, and the like. Probably the majority of cultural forms are, however, non-material. Among these are such things as words and other linguistic elements, wedding ceremonies, church services, families, customs of dressing, eating, sleeping, speaking, gesturing, and the like. The forms are the surface-level buildings blocks of culture. These are the visible things that are manipulated, invested with meanings, and interpreted by human beings according to conventions usually learned in childhood.

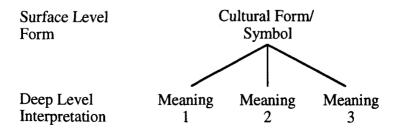
Most cultural and linguistic forms are interpreted by the people who use them as symbolizing meanings that lie beyond the forms themselves. Any given form, however, is likely to be interpretable in more than one way depending on the context in which it is being used, how it is ordinarily used, how it is suggested it should be used, and/or how the interpreter feels toward it. A table knife, for example, is likely to be used (and, therefore, interpreted most often) as a part of an eating context. Yet, if it is being used to pry open a can or if it is being used as a weapon, the interpretation will be quite different. And even the ordinary (i.e., the conventional) meaning assigned to it may be quite different if the interpreter has some strong positive or negative attachment to that kind of knife. "My knife" or "a knife like the one that someone hurt me with" can, for example, have far different meanings attached to them by certain people than that attached by most people to the simple symbol in its ordinary usage.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, any given form may be interpreted quite differently by different people (or even by the same person) at the same time. Think, for example, of the multiple interpretations of a church service. The same set of worship forms is likely to be perceived quite differently by those who have used them for forty years than by those for whom this is the first time. Tired old Christians and enthusiastic new converts will probably interpret very little church activity in the same way. Hymns, sermons, or even announcements that are familiar to the one group may be considered quite novel (and interpreted either in a positive

or a negative sense) by the other. Much that is easily intelligible to the older group may be quite differently perceived or even unintelligible to the younger group. I cannot forget the time when I handed the communion plate past my five-year-old son, then heard him tearfully ask, "Why can't I have any refreshments?" Thus, a given form may be interpreted by different people in such a way that more than one meaning is derived from it. This principle may be diagrammed thus:



Yet any given meaning may frequently be stimulated by more than one form. The bride in a wedding ceremony may, for example, interpret the wedding as signifying that she "has arrived." Other women in attendance may, however, have found other cultural forms, such as the attainment of a career goal or the birth of a child, to have conveyed to them that same meaning. In church frequently older and younger groups experience the same feeling of reverence and devotion via quite different musical forms. Different words, likewise, are required to communicate the same message to different groups. The following diagram illustrates this point:



This understanding of the relationship between cultural forms and the meanings attached to them by various persons has obvious *implications for the process of communication*. In the first place, we need to recognize that there is no communication without the use of cultural forms. Whether those forms are language forms or such things as touch, music, lighting and the like, they are essential in the communication process.

The fact that there are variables in the process, however, means that we need to be careful how we as communicators select and use the cultural forms available to us. The first of the principles diagrammed previously, for example, assures that whenever we deal with an audience made up of people with different backgrounds and life experiences, there will be a variety of different understandings of what we say and do. And the greater the distance between the persons and groups, the less the likelihood that the communicator's intent will be correctly understand by all. An effective communicator, therefore, segments his/her audience (as Jesus did), choosing one group to reach well, allowing the others to get what they can. A pastor and/or church music director may effectively choose one group one week and another the next. If this is done, though, he/she needs to interpret what is being done for the sake of the groups whose preferred forms are not being used on any given occasion.

The second of the principles diagrammed previously allows for variety in the presentation of messages. For many different wordings may be employed to say essentially the same thing. What needs to be watched, however, is the fact that groups "own" certain cultural forms. That is, they not only prefer certain ways of saying and doing things, they have built up a kind of possessiveness concerning those forms. If, then, the forms that associate with another group or another time and/or place are used, they are likely to reject the message because the forms are not "theirs." Young Americans frequently reject a Christianity couched in the music, preaching, and worship forms of another generation. This is not necessarily out of perversity. It may simply be that those forms convey to them paramessages concerning the fact that the system is "owned" by a

group (their parents) that they have been carefully taught (in school and by peers) to reject.

If, therefore, a message generated by one group is to be effectively presented to another group, the forms/symbols used to convey that message need to be those "owned" by the receiving group, whether or not they are the same as those preferred by the generating group. Many seminary-trained pastors are not made aware of this fact in seminary. They, therefore, present their messages to ordinary people in the language they learned in seminary. Some of their audience, then, get turned off because the language is not theirs. Others learn the pastor's language in order to understand him/her. Most learn from both of these groups come away with the impression that God is unwilling to identify with them linguistically.

This principle applies whether we are talking about the movement of messages, institutions, music, or other cultural forms from culture/subculture to culture/subculture or from generation to generation. God's approach to nomadic Semites via their familiar patriarchal system, to the settling Israelites via a fairly flexible system of judges and prophets, to a later generation of Israelites (though grudgingly) via kings, and so forth is one demonstration of God's use of this principle. His appeal to tradition-loving people via tradition (commonly translated "law") in the Old Testament and to those influenced by the Greek devotion to grace (via that concept) is another of many biblical illustrations. See Paul's statement of the principle in 1 Corinthians 9:20–22.

This principle underlies all effective communication from one group to another, whether via speaking, music, translation, or other means. This aspect of the second principle may be stated broadly: If the same meaning is to be retained when communicating to another group, the communicator needs to change the forms employed from those appropriate to the first group to those specifically appropriate to the new receiving group.

The corollary of this statement is the warning that if the forms preferred by the first group are retained in presenting the message to the second group the original meanings will be changed. The

paramessages conveyed by the use of their (i.e., the outsiders') vocabulary, their places, their music, and the like will hijack the message and make something else out of it. This is probably how the practices of the Pharisees (e.g., hand washing for purification and refraining from carrying loads on the Sabbath) that once meant devotion came in Jesus' day to be perceived by many (perhaps most) as signifying oppression.

Older people's music and sermonizing, antique places and forms of worship, archaic Bible translations and the like, though once conveying properly devotional meanings, now convey the same meaning of oppression to many contemporary youth. This is why parachurch organizations, such as Young Life, that have learned how to use youth culture to reach youth are more effective in their specialty than most churches. They have discovered that the forms used to convey the message have to be exchanged for the equivalent forms of the receiving group if the message is to remain the same. Successful are those churches that are learning from them.

The Place of Language

Even though the language forms we use to convey messages do not contain their meanings, they still play a very important part in communication. For language forms are the most obvious of the vehicles presented and interpreted by the participants in communicational events. When so used or interpreted, we refer to them as symbols. All communication proceeds via linguistic and non-linguistic symbols presented and interpreted by the interactants.

Spoken language is the most important symbol system (or code) in human experience. It is not, however, the only one. Human groups have developed other symbol systems based on touch, pictures, instrumental (i.e., non-vocal) music, posture, smell, time, space, lighting, and the like. These symbols are used, often in conjunction with language in culturally structured and interpretable ways (e.g., when a mother communicates love to a child through touch, or an artist communicates a particular feeling through a picture).

Language is commonly defined as a system of vocal symbols employed by the members of a community in socially approved ways for purposes such as communication and expression. The vocabulary of language is symbolic in that it stands for something other than itself. There is no necessary connection between the sound of the symbol and the reality it represents. There is no part of reality that requires that the name given to it sound the way it does. The names are given and maintained by the community of those who use them for as long as the members agree that those symbols should be used in that way. They are changed when the members agree that they should be changed.

Language, furthermore, is systematic and structured. There are six thousand or more distinct languages in the world today, each with its own peculiar symbol system and structure. To date, no language has been discovered that is not carefully and tightly structured. For this reason we refer to language as a system. It must be systematic in order to be useful in communication. As Nida has said,

A language code . . . must go together in a systematic way, or no two people could use the code. No one could possibly remember thousands of unique utterances. What is more, a language to be really useful must have the potentiality of endless generation of new expressions (Nida 1960:63).

But beyond these mechanical aspects of language, lies the level of meaning. And it is that relationship that is relevant to our discussion here. I want, therefore, to make a series of statements concerning the semantic area of language that are based on the insights of modern semanticists and summarized aptly by J. C. Condon (1975).

1. The first of these statements is that language is personal. A person's sociocultural situation, personal experiences, and the like strongly affect the way that person attaches meanings to the words he/she hears. We learn our language as persons from other persons in our community. Note, for example, the different labels used by people speaking different dialects of English to apply to the same objects. If you are an American you have a personal allegiance to the first item of each of the following pairs akin to your allegiance

to the American flag. If you are British, your allegiance will be to the second item in each pair: napkin/serviette, trunk (of car)/boot, tacks/drawing pins, wrench/spanner. Within the United States, then, certain groups "own" the first of the following pairs, while others are committed to the second: soda/pop, pail/bucket, sneakers/tennis shoes.

In spite of such group agreements, given individuals will habitually say things one way while others say the same things in other ways. For our language is ours. Such variation, however, must fit within the range of variation allowed by our speech community if we are to be understood. That is, it must be interpretable by others if communication is to take place. Otherwise what we say may only serve as self-expression.

2. Secondly, though human language is a remarkable feature of human experience, it can never be precise. Any given language label must be general enough that any member of the community can recognize what is being referred to and attach the meaning that his/her experience suggests. To attain that degree of generality, however, all but tightly controlled scientific communities settle for a considerable amount of impreciseness in most linguistic labels.

Ponder, for example, the range covered by broad labels such as dog or tree, each of which covers a well-nigh infinite variety of the kind of item that the society has agreed to categorize under that label. But even with labels attached to entities made up of a smaller range of items, the wide variety of experiences of those in the community with such entities assures impreciseness. Though scientists and other specialists have found it possible by strictly controlling the experiences of a limited community to narrow the range of meaning covered by technical labels, ordinary language does not work that way. And for our purposes we must remember that the Bible was written in ordinary, non-technical language. Furthermore, the people to whom we seek to communicate participate for the most part in ordinary rather than technical language.

3. A third important insight noted by semanticists is that language provides a kind of grid in terms of which we tend to per-

ceive reality. Since language is the product of a community of speakers, the labels are attached to items and aspects of reality as that community perceives them or, usually, as those of a previous generation perceived them. Language labels are attached to perceived reality, not to objective reality. For example, English speakers perceive five senses, eight to eleven basic colors, one kind of snow, and a general category called ant. Various other societies perceive less than five senses, three to five basic colors, many kinds of snow, and so many distinct types of what we call ants that they refuse to lump them into a single category. As we are taught our language, then, we are taught to perceive reality in the ways our forebears handed down to us.

Language is a remarkable vehicle for communicating what we want to communicate. But we do well to recognize the fact that what we see and want to communicate is often severely limited by the language and culture into which we have been trained. For example, most of us in America have a very difficult time believing in the existence of spirits, whether angels or evil spirits, in more than an academic way. The term spirit has been passed on to us with an aura of myth, unreality, and even fairy tale about it. To suggest that some or all diseases may be caused by spirits is, therefore, to most Americans tantamount to selling out to an alien perception of reality. We have been taught our bias so persuasively that any other bias seems wrong. Such limitations, mediated by language, affect our interpretations of all reality, including that presented by the Bible.

4. A fourth important insight of semantics is that there are usually several ways to say essentially the same thing. We have the kind of resources within our language to enable us to communicate nearly any relevant concept across the whole range of our community. It is, therefore, seldom good form to restrict ourselves to a single label for any given concept in a usually fruitless attempt to be precise. The preciseness of a word is in direct proportion to the smallness of the community that uses it and the limitedness of the range of contexts in which it is used. And it usually simply wastes time to attempt to define for people a precise label for a concept. We ought, rather, to define and elaborate the concept by the use of synonyms

and alternative labels, some of which may be a part of the receptor's experience.

5. A fifth important linguistic insight is the fact that vocabulary relates to meaning in such a way that words operate on different levels of abstraction. Whereas certain expressions refer rather specifically to a given item (e.g., my foot, the red truck), other expressions refer to much more general categories of reality (e.g., beauty, love, truth, justice). Both kinds of labels are symbols, but the one kind is specific and the other general. And as we speak, we commonly intermix the two levels of abstraction without warning to our hearers.

Being specific is an important communicational art, and one that is often in short supply among Christian communicators. Unfortunately, we often feel that because abstract concepts such as love and truth are mentioned so often, people must know what they mean. On the contrary, frequency of usage of abstract terms often lulls people to sleep, keeping them from really grappling with the concepts to discover the meanings and applications to life that are intended. As pointed out in chapter 2, I believe God is in favor of specific, life-related communication, communication that functions primarily at the specific rather than the abstract end of the spectrum.

Implications for Christian Communication

The understanding that what messages mean is constructed by the receiver rather than inherent in the message is perhaps the single most threatening insight of contemporary communication theory for Christian communicators. For in keeping with several of the myths discussed in the following chapter, those who deal with communication from a Christian point of view tend to focus much more strongly on either the source of the message or the message itself than they do on the receptors. It is my contention, however, that not only does contemporary communication theory indicate that a change is necessary but the very example of Jesus demands that we be receptor-oriented. In addition to recognizing the importance

of receptors, we need to make explicit certain of the implications of this view.

- 1. The first implication is that in every communicational situation we can point to at least three separate "realities" or views of reality.
- a. The first reality may be labeled *Objective Reality* (I will write this Reality with a capital R). This is the Reality that God alone is able to see and know in an undistorted way. Though humans see many aspects of this Reality, the fact that we always interact subjectively with whatever we experience means that we are unable to be certain that our interpretation of it is absolutely correct. This Reality includes all that actually exists and happens in the world. With regard to our subject, this includes all that goes on both external to and internal to the participants in a communicational interaction. Though only God sees this Reality perfectly, a perceptive, uninvolved observer of a communicational interaction may come closer to understanding what is really going on than either of the participants.
- b. Each participant in a communicational situation has his/her own perception of the Reality of that situation. The communicator sees in terms of what may be labeled the communicator's reality. A description of this reality would speak of the communicator's intent and his/her perception of the various components of the communicational situation. His/her overall perception of the meanings he/she intends to get across plus such elements as self, receptors, message, setting, timing, and the like would be prominent in such a description. The communicator's internal state (i.e., how he/she felt physically, psychologically, emotionally, and so forth) would also be in view as would such things as the security/lack of security, confidence/lack of confidence that he/she feels at the time the interaction is taking place.
- c. What we may call the receptor's reality is, however, likely to be quite different from what the communicator perceives. The receptor's perception of self, communicator, message, setting, and timing plus his internal state, security, confidence, and the like are bound to be different from the communicator's in both minor and

major ways. Thus the picture of the situation from the receiver's point of view will differ measurably from that in the communicator's mind. And both will differ from an objective view. But it is the receptor's picture that has the major influence on what is actually put across.

Communicational interactants act and react in terms of their perceived reality, rather than according to the objective Reality of the situation. The receiver, for example, responds not to what the communicator says, but to what he/she believes the communicator to have said. Likewise the receptor responds, not to the communicator as a person, but to his/her perception of the communicator as a person. Furthermore, with respect to setting, time, message, and even the receptor's internal state, it is the receiver's perception of these to which he/she responds, not the actuality that an objective view would describe. The materials with which the receptor is working to construct meaning, therefore, lie not in the objective details of the interaction, but in his/her subjective interpretation of the situation. Meanwhile, the communicator is restricted in his/her construction of meanings to his/her own subjective (and different) perception of the communicational situation and of each of its components.

Meanings, then, "are the internal responses that people make to stimuli" (Berlo 1960:184) based on their perception of the stimuli from within their own reality. On the basis of these meanings both the reality from which we respond and the reality to which we respond are constructed.

2. A second implication of this view is the *importance to the* process of communication of the personal relationship between the participants. Though it has been traditional to focus on the content of communicational events, the personal nature of the assignment of meaning requires that we give at least as much attention to the relationships between the participants. For "Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former" (Watzlawick et al. 1967:54). That is, the dynamics of the relationship between the communicators and the receptors provide them and any observers with information concerning how to interpret what is really meant by the utterances (and other symbols) employed.

These authors illustrate their point by citing a couple of possible statements that might be made by a father to his son as he is teaching the latter to drive. One statement might be "It is important to release the clutch gradually and smoothly." The other might be "Just let the clutch go, it'll ruin the transmission in no time." In the context in focus each of these statements contain approximately the same information. The statements reveal, however, quite different relationships between the participants.

Since all that transpires is interpreted and becomes part of the message as heard by the receptor, it is logical that the relationship between the participants contributes markedly to the success or failure of the interaction. It is, therefore, crucial that we keep ourselves continually aware of this factor.

It is too easy to ignore the relational aspect of communication unless something goes radically wrong. When the interactants are in a healthy relationship, they may be quite unconscious of the part that relational healthiness plays in their ability to communicate effectively. If, however, the relationship is "sick," the interactants will be constantly hindered in their attempts to effectively convey content to each other. Not only that, but it is likely that the majority of the content they do deal with will concern the relationship itself rather than whatever else they attempt to get across.

As we have seen continually, then, it is not simply the surface-level verbal (and other) symbols that are interpreted to produce the meanings of a communicational event. These may be what is in focus. But they are but the tip of the total communicational iceberg. And the relationship part of the iceberg dare not be ignored. Note, for example, what the tone of voice used in an interpersonal interaction tells us about the relationship between the interactants and what that predicts concerning the outcome of the interaction. Likewise with such components as facial expressions, the use of space, time, lighting, perfume, music and the like. Such vehicles are used to send important messages concerning the perception of one or both parties concerning the relationship.

Jesus, of course, based his whole ministry on the personal relationships he had with a fairly small group of followers. It was his

life involvement with them that enabled his messages to get across at such a deep level. Again, his example confirms a major insight of those who have studied communication theory. It also provides for us the right example for us to imitate.

3. A third implication of this view is that those with similar perceptions of similar experiences are most likely to construct similar meanings. It is not enough to have similar experiences. Persons must perceive them similarly if they are to come out with similar meanings. An optimist and a pessimist, for example, will interpret the same experience differently.

The fact that people arrange themselves in groups within which they conduct most of their interpersonal interactions leads to the standardization by these groups of their interpretations. Thus it is that groups agree strongly that given symbols are to be interpreted in one way and not in another. This raises to a very high level the predictability of similar interpretations and responses to similar stimuli on the part of the members of any given group. The tighter the group, then, the lower the risk of misinterpretation of communicational symbols within that group. The greater the diversity and lack of closeness between the members of a group, the greater the likelihood that various members will interpret communicational symbols differently.

4. However, even in the tightest groups, individuals differ. Humans are given both to creativity and to making mistakes. Thus, at certain times either of these factors will result in perceptions differing from those of the majority of the group most of the time.

If we could measure closely enough, it is likely that we'd find that no two people ever attach exactly the same set of meanings to any given symbol, no matter how tight the group they are in. People can usually understand, however, because we accept a range of allowable variation in the interpretation of the symbols we use.

If, for example, we took a word symbol such as father in American culture, we would find that there is quite a range of interpretation. The range would include perceptions varying from close to distant, warm and loving to cool and reserved. Though we might agree

that the ideal father would be as close as possible to the close, warm, loving end of the spectrum, our experience with our fathers alerts us to the fact that there are actually many other kinds as well. Thus, when an American hears the term "father," he/she attaches the meaning appropriate to his/her experience, rather than that agreed upon by the society as the ideal.

Likewise with all attachment of meaning to symbols—there is a range keyed to individual as well as group experience within which those who use the symbols work. Even as the members of different groups are likely to interpret any given symbol differently, so the individuals within a group are likely to interpret at least slightly differently, based on their interpretations of the differences in their experiences.

5. The personalness of communication results in the fact that meanings are more felt than reasoned. There is a good bit of evidence that the immediate response of people to any given situation is more likely to be emotional than rational. If, then, they think over the event, they may revise their earlier assessment to some extent on the basis of a more rational consideration. First impressions based on feeling are, however, very difficult to shake, even when considered rationally.

It has been traditional to distinguish between denotative and connotative meaning. Denotative or dictionary meaning is seen as a more or less objective and rational thing. The connotations of the symbol, those meanings likely to be derived from the experience the person has had with that symbol, are, however, more subjective. It appears that, in a sense, persons take that denotative meaning and wrap it in their experience with the term so that the feeling they have for the symbol is most in focus when the total meaning is attached.

6. A further implication for the attachment of meaning comes from the nature of the Christian message we seek to convey. For this message is far more than a verbal message—it is a "person message." That is, as pointed out in chapter 2, God's communication is personal rather than simply informational. If we are attempting to get across information about such things as mathematics (e.g., 2 + 2 = 4), weather (e.g., the temperature is 30 degrees), or

the world news, words are sufficient. The kind of life the communicator lives is of little, if any, relevance to such messages and the meanings attached by the receptors.

God, however, has a very high level of participation in his message and expects us to have a similar degree of participation in it when we pass it along. For in this kind of message, the person who brings the message is a major part of the message he/she brings. God brings his message of love by personalizing that love. He brings the message of his truth by becoming that Truth (Jn 14:6). And we who receive these messages cannot properly attach meanings to them without responding to the One who brings the messages.

God himself is the message, and we are to respond to a person to properly attach meaning to that message. At the purely human level, we do the same thing with messages of love, care, concern, sympathy and the like—we respond not simply to words but to the person who does the deed. These are messages only effectively conveyed by life rubbing against life. The ultimate Christian message, then, is a person. And anything that reduces that message to mere words stimulates in the receptor meanings unworthy of the message. Our message is a message of life and only life can properly convey it. Thus, only if that message is actually conveyed by life can it be properly understood.

Let these insights concerning meaning inform our attempts to communicate this person and life message. Let them guide us to imitate our Lord who became the message he proclaimed and thus to lead our receptors into the same transforming relationship with him that we enjoy.

Chapter Six

TEN MYTHS CONCERNING COMMUNICATION

My aim in this chapter is to summarize and elaborate on several of the principles we have already dealt with while at the same time applying them to certain of the situations we regularly face as Christian communicators. To do this I will highlight several of the inaccurate things we have been taught to believe concerning communication. These inaccurate things I will call "myths."

As I reflect on these myths, my memory takes me back to two of the very worst sermons I have ever heard. In one of them the preacher contended that God has ordained that monolog preaching be the way the Gospel is to be communicated. This is what Jesus and the apostles did, he asserted. Paul, then, abandoned all other ways of communication to give himself to the "foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor 1:21). And down through the ages, God has seen fit to spread his kingdom throughout the world via preaching. We, therefore, are to bend all efforts to obey God by dedicating ourselves to that form of communication, in spite of public opinion because it is ordained by God.

The speaker's presentation was based on such misunderstanding of God's approach to communication and of the insights provided for us by modern communication theory that I found it extremely difficult to keep from engaging him in a public argument over what he was saying. He never saw fit to define what he meant by preaching. Nor did he seem particularly concerned to illustrate his points from the Scriptures, though he claimed to be preaching from them.

On another occasion I was listening to a message on the Word of God. The speaker was presenting his view that the written Word possesses some kind of power of its own, a kind of magic that forces people to do things. We, therefore, are simply to speak it forth, and it miraculously draws people to God. We must not do anything to it, like trying to communicate it or make it relevant. It already has everything in it that God wants there, and we only tamper when we try to do anything with or to it.

I wish that these men were right. I wish that all we had to do was to open our mouths, quote Scripture, and watch people flock to Christ. But that is not what we see going on. Instead we see sincere, dedicated, highly motivated, praying ministers of the gospel faithfully preaching but frequently producing very little fruit. Or sometimes they bear fruit, but have no idea how it happens. Meanwhile, not a few scoundrels who know how to communicate effectively are quite successful at winning people to very questionable causes.

Let's explain and examine the kinds of myths that these and other Christian communicators have come to believe and practice to see if we can get a better understanding of the kinds of assumptions we need to get rid of if we are to communicate more like God does.

MYTH 1: Hearing the gospel with one's ears is equivalent to "being reached" with the gospel.

Romans 10:14 speaks of hearing in relation to proclamation on the one hand and to belief on the other. But many Christians seem to have a far too simplistic view of what is involved in the hearing that leads to a faith response. They often seem to equate the hearing that denotes simply listening with the hearing that denotes understanding. Thus they often give themselves to mass media approaches to communication on the assumption that if we can simply get all the world's peoples within earshot of the gospel, the whole world will soon be evangelized.

Yet simple hearing with the ears and intelligent understanding (hearing at a much deeper level) are quite distinct kinds of activity. And unless the hearers are already quite positive toward the mes-

sage, deep-level understanding requires persuasion, a kind of communication not easily accomplished via mass media. Those not already convinced or at least open to a message coming via mass media usually turn it off or tune it out. Unsympathetic hearers usually do the same with the messages presented in a hit-and-run fashion by strangers who show greater commitment to the information they have to share than to the people with whom they share it.

Such facts speak to the need for person-to-person, long-term communication of the gospel message as the norm, with more limited and specialized use of other vehicles such as mass media. Public communication (e.g., lecturing, preaching) and mass media (e.g., radio, television, literature) are effective when the receptors feel a great need for the message that is presented. When there is no such felt need, research has shown that those who listen are those who are already positive toward the message (Engel 1979:22). There is, therefore, no magic in the media, since understanding lies far deeper than exposure. God's basic method is incarnation.

MYTH 2: The words of the Bible are so powerful in and of themselves that all that's necessary to bring people to Christ is for them to be exposed to hearing/reading the Bible.

We cannot lightly ignore the concern expressed here. The Bible is inspired. It is the Word of God. And as such we want to be careful to treat it as the special revelation that it is. But we dare not allow our respect for the Bible to devolve into superstition and idolatry. The fact that the Bible is inspired should not be interpreted to mean that spiritual power is conveyed magically when its words are used. Such a view of the magical nature of Biblical words as formulas that convey spiritual power is the attitude of pagan superstition (and, apparently, of the second preacher cited above), not of Christian reverence. We must never forget that the power displayed when the words and concepts of the Bible are presented is the power of the Holy Spirit, not that of the words themselves.

When I reflect on my own early Christian experience, I note this magical attitude in myself. There were occasions when I would reflect on unsuccessful attempts at witness and conclude that the reason for my lack of success was the fact that I had not quoted the Scriptures word perfectly, i.e., so that every word from the King James Version was in its proper place as it came out of my mouth. Usually my mistakes were trivial and in no way resulted in any significant change in the meaning of the verse. But somehow I had assimilated the attitude that since those words in and of themselves possessed the power to convert, my failure to quote them with total accuracy had somehow broken the spell and led to my lack of success.

Such an attitude may be extreme, but there are many Christians, both professional and lay, whose reverence for the exact words, often of a particular version of the Bible, is somewhat akin to what I have described. Typically such people are somewhat suspicious or even skeptical of the need for explanation, interpretation, and communication of the Bible. They commit themselves to literal Bible translations on the assumption that a literal translation is more accurate because it is less interpretative. They often have a preference for exegetical preaching on the assumption that exegetical preaching is always more biblical than, say, topical preaching (in spite of the fact that Jesus was always topical). In witnessing they endeavor to quote as much Scripture as possible, on the assumption that the more of God's Word they can use and the less of their own words, the more likely they are to get a positive response. They are often keen to get printed Bibles out to the ends of the earth even without personal witnesses to interpret them to the receptors, on the assumption that God's unaided Word is sufficient to win the multitudes to Christ.

But though God sometimes works through his Word alone, his primary vehicle is still people who in word and deed interpret that Word. There is no magic in words themselves, even scriptural words. And quite often those words, concerning other people at other times, need to be handled by a Spirit-led communicator if they are to be interpreted properly by the receptors. It is, I believe, inappropriate for a Christian to avoid his/her responsibility in the communication process on the assumption that God will do it through his Word alone. Likewise with respect to translation, the translator who attempts to avoid interpreting only interprets badly. For a transla-

tor, like all other communicators, is responsible for building the communicational bridge all the way from the source to the receptor. And for this purpose the translator must translate with as much concern for the receptor's frame of reference as for that of the source text

Many who believe this myth contend that the Bible is inherently relevant. We do not, therefore, need to make it relevant. Though such a statement is accurate when referring to the Bible's potential, it ignores the crucial fact that often something that is potentially relevant is perceived by the receptors as irrelevant and is, therefore, rejected. I take the position that, though the Bible is potentially relevant, God desires that his people give themselves to communicating in such a way that the Word is also perceived as relevant at the receptors' end.

MYTH 3: The Holy Spirit will make up for all mistakes if we are sincere, spiritual, and prayerful enough.

I sincerely wish this were so. But our experience is that we frequently find very spiritual people making incredible blunders and turning people away from the gospel, while many who are apparently misleading people are attracting large followings. Perhaps many believe this myth because they fail to distinguish between what God can do and what he chooses to do. God is omnipotent. This means he can do anything he wants to do. But throughout the Scriptures we see him restraining himself from using his power at many points when it might have been a better idea (from our point of view) for him to step in.

Why, for example, did he not simply step in and clear out the land of Palestine for his people? The Israelites experienced untold agony, temptation, and failure as a result of the fact that non-Israelites remained in the land. Why does God allow evil? Why does he allow suffering? Why, when he had the power to keep Jesus from being killed, did he not use that power? We don't know the answers to these questions, but we refuse to believe that God is limited by factors external to himself. It must be that for reasons that

we cannot now understand God limits himself, deliberately choosing not to step in and exercise his power. A myth like this one, however, assumes that God will step into communicational situations in which we are involved if we are only spiritual enough. And if he does not step in, we conclude that the problem is our lack of spirituality. I contend that this is not necessarily the reason.

I have tried to point out in chapter 2 how even God seems to abide by the rules for effective communication that he built into the Creation. I believe he expects us to abide by them also. Though he may on occasion step in and direct situations in such a way that they are not as bad as they could have been and often, probably, does this without our even knowing it, I don't believe this is normal practice, or one that we can count on. I think he normally expects us to learn the proper techniques and to employ them in partnership with him so that when we do our job better, he is able to do his better.

MYTH 4: As Christians we should severely restrict our contacts with "evil" people and refrain from going to "evil" places lest we "lose our testimony" and ruin our witness.

How carefully many churches teach their members to keep away from certain people and places lest their witness be harmed. There is a certain amount of truth in such warnings, particularly for immature Christians. But the basis for such warnings is fear that our Christian commitment is so weak that we will be influenced by those around us to compromise our witness. To maintain our "purity," therefore, we must associate primarily with those of "like mind" lest we be contaminated. But such a practice imitates the Pharisees, not our Lord. For it was the Pharisees who were scrupulously careful not to go to certain places and not to associate with certain people. But Jesus said, "People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick" (Matt 9:11–13). To be sure, Jesus was criticized for associating with the wrong kind of people but can we seriously recommend the example of the Pharisees in preference to his own example?

I remember how shocked many of us were to hear a committed Christian lady make this same point by testifying that she no longer has time to go to Wednesday evening prayer meetings. For Wednesday evening is the time when her local PTA meets. She went on to point out that she had nothing against the Wednesday prayer meeting. Indeed, she greatly enjoyed the fellowship and spiritual enrichment of those meetings. But they kept her from cultivating friendships with non-Christians. And she felt that God wanted her to be a witness rather than simply a person who soaks up spiritual nourishment.

Receptor-oriented communication of the gospel is a risky business, for it requires that we go where the receptors are and identify with them (though not participate in their sin) in order to reach them. We are to imitate Jesus in this regard, not the Pharisees. We are, like Paul, to become Jews to Jews, Gentiles to Gentiles, rich to rich, poor to poor, that we "may save some of them by whatever means are possible" (1 Cor 9:20–22). And if our supposedly strong brethren criticize us for imitating Jesus by identifying with the weak and the lost, that is a spiritual problem that they will have to deal with.

MYTH 5: Preaching is God's ordained means of communicating the gospel.

The word "preach" brings to mind one person (the preacher) monologing while the listeners sit silently. The custom of preaching represents the church's adoption of Greek oratorical practice as the central focus of its communicational activity. Though the use of such oratory in church contexts has been common since early times, it was apparently during the Reformation that Protestants replaced the mass with a monolog lecture (the sermon) as the central feature of the worship service. The present place and nature of monolog homilies in Protestant worship are thus of relatively recent origin.

Yet standard English translations of the Scriptures show the words preach, proclaim, and their derivatives occurring some two

hundred times. Are we not commanded to preach? Didn't John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples communicate mainly through preaching? The answer is, not necessarily. For their view of communication was much broader than the concept most English speakers attach to the word preach.

Something very misleading has happened that relates first to the way the early Christians used certain Greek words and then to a tradition that has developed among Bible translators and interpreters.

1. It became the custom of the early church to employ the Greek word kerusso and its derivatives as the preferred label for their attempts to communicate the gospel. This word, like many of the words the early church used, did not originally cover every kind of activity to which they applied it. Kerusso referred mainly to the announcing that heralds or town criers did as they moved from house to house and from town to town making the kinds of important announcements for which we today depend on radio and television (see Kittel 1967:683-718). The word was chosen by the early Christians and used in an expanded way to refer to a much wider range of communicational activity. It included monolog lecturing but was also used to label interactions that were mainly dialogical, as long as the focus was on the communication of the gospel. It is an interesting confirmation of this fact that John, perhaps sensing the limitations of this word, consistently uses the word witness (martureo) in its place.

Since words derive their meanings from the things they are used to label, we should seek the biblical meaning of *kerusso* by studying the contexts in which it is used (see Barr 1961). When, therefore, we find Jesus, John the Baptist, Paul, and others presenting the gospel largely via dialog, we should recognize that the term often used to label their activities has a broader meaning than that suggested by our word preach. Although the proclamation or announcement of something important is usually in focus when *kerusso* is used, the method (i.e., whether monolog or dialog) is not in focus as with our word preach.

2. The use of the terms preach and proclaim as virtually the only translations of *kerusso* and several other Greek terms suggests,

then, the failure of translators and other biblical interpreters to find in English a term that adequately represents the range of meaning covered by the original terms. In present day English, at least, such a term is readily at hand in the word communicate. I would, therefore, contend that in many (perhaps most) of the places where it is clear that the broad presentation of the gospel is intended by such Greek terms as *kerusso*, it would be more accurate to translate it "communicate."

For example, Mark 16:15b would read, Go throughout the whole world and communicate the gospel; Mark 13:10, The gospel must be communicated to all peoples; Matthew 26:13b Wherever this gospel is communicated all over the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her; Galatians 2:2b, The gospel that I communicate to the Gentiles; Galatians 1:23b, The man ... is now communicating the faith that he once tried to destroy. Indeed, one can open a concordance to the words preach or proclaim and nearly always obtain a better rendering by replacing them with communicate.

Perhaps this is laboring the point. Perhaps. But when even learned people (such as those cited above) are misled and as a result mislead others into believing that God endorses the foolishness (1 Cor. 1:21b) of the monolog form of presenting the gospel, something is badly amiss. Paul is referring, of course, not to the foolishness of the form preaching, but to the content of the message that many regarded as foolish (see the TEV and NIV translations of 1 Cor 1:21b).

It is simply a myth, supported on the one hand by a historical fallacy (that this is the way the early church did it) and on the other by inadequate translation that gives the impression that monolog preaching is God's intended way of getting his message out. There is no magic in this (or any other) method. Jesus himself seemed to much prefer dialog, interactional communication that encourages immediate feedback and, if necessary, adjustment of the message to assure greater relevance.

MYTH 6: The sermon is an effective vehicle for bringing about life change.

Many Christians, both pastors and the members of their congregations, feel that the purpose of the Sunday morning sermon is to bring about major changes in the hearers' lives. Pastors are trained to understand that they should put large amounts of time into producing good content that they can deliver during the Sunday morning sermon time. Their constant prayer is that through their efforts the lives of their parishioners will be significantly changed for the better. Parishioners, too, often come with the expectation that they will be exposed to new, potentially life-changing insight. Yet the expected very seldom materializes, for there are other factors at work.

In communication, as in all of life, events can be analyzed at two levels: the level of the ideal or intended function and the level of the actual function. Pastors and people often intend that lives be changed through sermons. But factors such as the setting in which the sermon is delivered and the limitations of the monolog method very often conspire to keep it from functioning as the participants intend. Instead, since the sermon is presented as a part of worship ritual, it tends to function in that context as but one (important) part of this "ritual of consolidation." The fact that monolog presentations are poorly suited to stimulate significant life change mitigates against the intended function turning out to be the real function. Instead, the very valuable function of consolidation and mutual sharing of the same experience by like-minded people takes over the sermon part of the worship service as well as all of its other parts.

I do not regard this as a bad thing. If, however, the expectations of those who participate in such activity are quite different from what actually goes on, there can be serious consequences. Take, for example, the pastor who is oriented primarily toward the preparation and delivery of fine sermons at the expense of seeking extensive and intensive personal relationships with his parishioners. He may, in keeping with the way he has been taught, expect that such an emphasis is the God-ordained way to lead (or drive) his hearers into Christian maturity and then be very disappointed when very little change occurs in them. Such disappointment leads many to

question their calling. It is not, however, the calling that should be questioned, but the adequacy of the vehicle employed to achieve the intended goal. Monolog preaching, though useful for certain purposes, is simply too frail a vehicle to adequately carry lifechanging messages.

What often happens with monolog preaching is that sermon-hearing becomes a spectator sport in which the actual functions served are quite different from those aimed at. Though the stated goals refer to persuasion and instruction, what often goes on is more similar to a musical or an athletic performance in which the preacher prepares and practices during the week to perform competitively on Sunday. The real aim, then, may become to win the applause of the congregation expressed via compliments on the sermons, continued attendance (rather than leaving for another church), and the attracting of additional attendees (usually those who have left other churches).

Such congregations are every bit as much spectators as those at musical or athletic performances. However, most of the spectators are "regulars," and this makes a difference. For they are regularly life-involved with each other and with the pastor in at least this one small portion of life. This enhances the feeling of solidarity with the pastor and other members of the congregation that they experience throughout the worship service. Others, however, may feel that they are merely spectators watching someone else's game (a feeling that, unfortunately, is often contributed to by other aspects of the worship service as well). For these, especially, personal contact outside the church context is crucial. Neither group, however, is changed much as a result of the sermons they hear.

The Sunday morning sermon functions as a reinforcement of things largely already agreed upon by the group. A wise pastor can use the sermon to remind, to strengthen, to challenge concerning commitments already entered into. Any hint of competition for an oratorical prize should, however, be avoided in favor of more participatory verbal and nonverbal activities designed to cultivate interaction rather than simply observation. Such interaction reinforces commonality and group identity and thereby contributes to the growth of the congregation both corporately and individually. Pas-

tor and people move and grow together, though usually very slowly. Sermons should not leave people unfed or even unchallenged. But pastors who expect much radical change as a result of sermonizing alone are likely to be quite disappointed. A psychologist or other agent of change (e.g., Jesus) would not attempt therapy via lectures that stifle feedback and minimize the ability of the communicator to make specific responses and adjustments to his/her receptors. Neither should church leaders.

Sermons should function as important parts of the participation of pastor and people in their joint struggle toward Christian maturity, even as the rest of the worship service does. When, however, people are to be reprimanded or otherwise challenged to make radical changes in their behavior, communicational techniques other than the sermon need to be employed. Visitation and small group interaction are much better suited for these purposes. Indeed, it is in such interactions that people are often prepared to make dramatic responses to sermons, misleading the uninformed to believe that there is more power in sermonizing than there really is.

I argue for Christians to use a multiplicity of forms of communication, chosen according to their appropriateness in the given situation. This is, I believe, what Jesus did. A monolog approach is thoroughly appropriate if one wants to present a body of cognitive information in a fairly short period of time to a fairly large audience for the purpose of making them aware or increasing their knowledge. But a monolog approach is very poorly suited to either changing people's opinions or leading them to make significant changes in their lives. With this latter purpose in mind, Jesus employed what I'll call a "life involvement" (i.e., discipleship) methodology (see chapter 7).

MYTH 7: There is one best way to communicate the gospel.

Many people believe that there is a single best way to communicate the gospel. Indeed, many may be reading this book with the aim of discovering what that best way is. As Americans we seem particularly prone to fads in this regard. One pastor develops a plan

for evangelism that is successful in one area and before long a large number of other pastors are trying to imitate it. Many groups seem to be successfully using radio. So other groups begin to imitate them by starting their own radio programs. Preachers with certain characteristics seem to draw large crowds, so others begin imitating their preaching style. Billy Graham develops a certain style of preaching, and before long, it seems, every evangelist in the country has adopted the same style. But many discover that the communication style that they have imitated is not as successful for them in their situation as it was for the originator in his/her situation.

The problem is, I believe, that people and situations are different enough that no single style is going to be appropriate for all people in all situations. Professional communicators should learn a multiplicity of styles and techniques that can be applied to the proper groups at the proper times in the proper places. Many communicators are like television repairmen who are only able to use a single tool. Imagine a repairman coming to your home, examining your set, and leaving without repairing it because he/she could only use a screwdriver and the repair required the use of a wrench. Many of us are like that in our approach to communication. We can only use a single method, no matter what the situation or who the audience.

Many can preach effectively but are not very good in interpersonal relations. These may become preachers but fail at being pastors. Some can communicate fairly well as long as they control the topics of conversation. But they are lost if receptors begin to ask questions that relate to their own agenda but not to that of the communicator. Such people are forced to take a catechetical approach to Christian witness. That is, since they are only able to answer certain questions, they must first teach the receptor to ask those that they can answer. They are like salesmen who have memorized their sales pitch but if they are interrupted must go back to the beginning and start over again.

The communicator of the gospel should be like a repairman who has a toolbox full of tools and is able to study any situation and use the appropriate tool or technique. If, then, he/she finds him/herself

in a different situation, one that demands a different approach, he/she is able to adapt and use an appropriately different approach.

Jesus models this kind of approach to communication very well. If we go from chapter to chapter of the Gospel of John, we find him always starting with a subject and a technique that are appropriate to his receptors. He seems always to adapt to the requirements of the situation and to the felt needs of his hearers. He is not tied to a single method or to certain specified places and times. Adaptability is the name of the game.

MYTH 8: The key to effective communication is the precise formulation of the message.

Many would-be communicators pay primary attention to the technical preciseness, accuracy, and truthfulness of the words and phrases they use to construct their messages. Yet the choice to use precise, technical language, especially with popular audiences, usually increases rather than decreases the possibility of misinterpretation. The drive toward preciseness does not take account of the fact that much of what goes into effective communication is outside the control of the communicator. It is the receptor who has the final say concerning what is communicated. And the key is the impact the message makes on him/her regardless of the technical accuracy of the presentation. This fact explains why many very well constructed messages result in a great deal of misunderstanding. Yet many would-be communicators seem far too little concerned with person factors, those things that affect how the receptor will interpret the message.

Precise language is the language of a particular in-group such as theologians or other academics. And those not in that group are likely to misunderstand or misinterpret when such language is used. Such is the typical response of nonseminary-trained hearers to the sermons of countless pastors who have not yet learned to exchange their seminary language for that of the people they seek to minister to. The Bible, however, shows that God employs down-to-earth

language. There is very little technical language used in the original Hebrew and Greek.

The biblical texts have suffered greatly at the hands of scholarly translators who, probably because they are unaware of this principle, have tended to represent non-technical biblical words in technical English. Words like conversion, redemption, sin, repentance, and even church have become technical words in English, though the scriptural words they translate are not technical. It is to correct this error that the communicationally aware translators of the Good News Bible, Phillips' New Testament, and the Living Bible have gone against church tradition and sought to render the non-technical language of the biblical manuscripts with equivalently non-technical English.

God's way is to use ordinary, highly communicative language to convey spiritual truth. This fact is a part of the nature of the Scriptures. The word commonly translated "convert," for example, is the ordinary Greek word for "turn." Likewise, the word translated "repent" is the ordinary Greek word referring to changing one's mind or attitude. Such ordinary words used with proper elaboration and illustration have a far better chance of being interpreted correctly than do technical words. With this in mind, then, the effective communicator strives to couch the message in the vocabulary that is likely to be most accurately interpreted by his/her hearers.

Truly effective communicators are more concerned with stimulating the proper kind of response to their messages than with the preciseness of their vocabulary. They, therefore, prepare carefully but with a very different emphasis than those who aim at technical preciseness. They concern themselves with person factors more than with the impersonal, structural, and linguistic factors in message construction. They are constantly conscious of, and oriented toward, the impression their messages make on their receptors.

MYTH 9: Words contain their meanings.

Often underlying the kind of attitude we discussed under myth 8 is the assumption that it is the nature of words to contain their meaning. Words are regarded as more or less like the boxcars on a freight train. They have goods inside them and can be connected at both ends to other words that likewise carry specific meanings. Thus a sentence gets built up like a freight train by connecting cars together. And meanings are deciphered by examining the contents of the words that are strung together.

The problem with this approach to understanding language is that a given word may have different meanings to different groups of people. And these meanings depend on how the members of the group agree with each other concerning the proper use of the words. Some years ago, for example, an agreement developed among American youth that the word cool should be used when a person wants to show that he/she is positive toward someone or something. Americans of older generations had no such agreement. Their agreement was to use other words in such contexts. In listening to young people who used the word cool, older people had to learn to translate by equating it with their preferred word in such contexts.

Another example would be the differences in meaning attached to so-called "four-letter words." In certain groups the use of such words is interpreted as normal and natural. In other groups such words are regularly used but only when people want to say something in as forceful a way as possible. In still other groups (including evangelical Christian groups) the meaning the hearers would attach to the use of any of those words at any time would be extreme vulgarity and total inappropriateness, no matter how agitated the user might be.

Such illustrations, and there are many others, point to the fact that meanings are attached to words (and other symbols used in communication) by people rather than being an inherent part of the words themselves. The same meanings are, therefore, attached when people continue to use words in the same way. Meanings are changed, then, when people decide to use words in different ways. These changes become clear when one studies the etymology and

subsequent history of any given word. The fact that meanings do not fluctuate wildly points to the power of such agreements. Indeed, within a given community, the range of variation covered by a given word can often be delineated quite precisely because of the power of these agreements brought about by strong cultural conditioning. But this should not allow us to lose sight of the fact that it is cultural agreements that maintain the constancy of word meaning just as it is cultural agreement that brings about change in word meanings.

This insight adds to our understanding of some of the problems related to preciseness of vocabulary dealt with above, for a word's preciseness is directly related to the tightness of control over the agreement concerning its meaning held by the community that uses it. Smaller communities, such as those sharing a narrow technical specialty, are able to keep tighter control over the vocabulary they use in their area of specialization. Terms that are used more widely, particularly if used by a variety of different groups, tend to be less precise. The preciseness of a word is proportional to how widely it is used. Thus, while preachers may find it quite appropriate to use a technical theological vocabulary within a community of theologians, it is inadvisable for them to do so outside that community. Those who have studied in theological institutions where it is quite appropriate to use such vocabulary must learn to communicate cross-culturally when they leave that community if they are to be understood.

For words are like darts or arrows that prick people, thereby stimulating them to construct given meanings. They are not like boxes that contain their meanings. And the kind of meanings they stimulate are those on which the community of the receptor agrees, whether or not they are the same as those intended by the communicator.

MYTH 10: What people really need is more information.

We often assume that what others really need in order to become Christian or to progress in the Christian life is more information. If they only knew what we know about God and Christ, we say, they would certainly respond and grow. So our job is to get them more facts. The problem with this myth is that there are plenty

of people who have enough information to become Christians who still refuse. Even Satan and demons have enough information to repent and turn back to God, but they refuse (Jas 2:19). Certainly their basic problem is not a lack of knowledge and information. Nor is such a lack the major reason why people reject the gospel.

The problem, I believe, is basically a matter of stimulus. People reject because they experience no adequate stimulus to accept the gospel. Perhaps their sinfulness and self-will motivate them against it. Perhaps, in addition, they have never experienced a relationship with anyone for whom the gospel made an attractive difference in his/her life. But they know enough facts so that if they wanted to they could turn their face toward God in faith and be saved. Motivation is the crucial problem, not lack of knowledge.

One twist of this particular myth is the belief that only those who know and accept certain doctrinal facts can be saved. This position advocates a kind of salvation by knowledge. Many would require a fairly long list of essential doctrines to be believed in order for a person to be saved. Others would require a shorter list but, I believe, still put such knowledge in too high a position. Actually, I think the Scriptures indicate that saving faith requires very little knowledge, at least at the beginning. Perhaps all that is necessary is indicated in Hebrews 11:6b: "Whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek him." The thief on the cross (Luke 23:39–43) is perhaps the clearest example of one who had very little knowledge but who was soon to join Jesus with God because he demonstrated the proper faith-response to what he did know.

My point is that as Christian witnesses our real job is not to convey large amounts of information, though frequently the proper type and amount of information at the right time can provide the stimulus required to bring about the decision advocated. Rather, we are to stimulate people to respond to the God they probably already have enough information about.

These, then, are ten of the kinds of myths widely believed in the Christian community that hinder the kind of communication of God's messages that he intends. I trust that an awareness of them can assist us in overcoming the fallacies they represent.

Chapter Seven

THE POWER OF LIFE INVOLVEMENT

The topic I want to deal with in this chapter is something that will serve, on the one hand, as an illustration of a number of things I've said in the preceding chapters and, on the other, as a probe into some new areas that are important to us as Christian communicators. In Matthew 4:19, Jesus says, "Come along with me." The word usually translated "follow" implies "come along with" or even, "commit yourself to." It is not the kind of thing that one would say to a dog to get it to follow, but what would be said to invite another to commitment.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd has committed himself to us (Jn 10:11–15). Not only was he willing to die for us, he also lived for us, setting an example for us to follow. I believe this example extends to the way he did things. In pondering this fact, I came a few years ago to ask questions concerning the means we use to carry out what we think are Jesus' ends. I asked things like, what are we trying to bring about through church services? I concluded that we are trying to bring about behavioral change. That is, we want people who are so solidly influenced by our message that their behavior is radically affected. Whether it is the behavior of people who have not yet committed themselves to Christ, or the behavior of those who have already started on the road, our aim is to try to deepen and broaden their commitment.

I further asked, what kind of communication methodology is appropriate for trying to bring about the type of behavioral change? And, if monolog is not the best method for appealing for behavioral change, what is it good for? In grappling with these questions

I began to develop a typology of approaches to communication in which I try to summarize several elements of three approaches to communication. The first approach is the monolog approach. The second is the dialog or discussion approach. The third approach is what I label "life involvement." The chart on pages 120–121 outlines the items discussed in this chapter.

1. In the typology the first characteristic to deal with is the method of presentation. We all know what monolog is. We experience this form of communication as the almost exclusive method used in sermons and lectures. Dialog or discussion, on the other hand, is more frequently employed in situations like Sunday School classes, Bible studies or other smaller group experiences. Many situations that look like dialog situations are, of course, merely opportunities for a leader to monolog. The leader may or may not allow serious discussion type interaction on the part of the others in the group. Such a situation would fall under the monolog column rather than under the dialog/discussion column.

The third method of presentation, here termed "life involvement," may not be as readily understandable as the first two, however. What I am thinking of here is a long term association between communicator and receptors in a variety of life situations, many of which might be quite informal and not highly dependent upon verbalization as the only means of communication. Discipleship and apprenticeship are examples of this kind of communicational method. In discipleship the teacher spends long periods of time with his disciples in a wide variety of life activity. Jesus and his disciples were together twenty-four hours a day living and working together for between two and three years. In apprenticeship, an apprentice spends long periods of time with his teacher in a variety of work related activities.

Another illustration of life involvement communication is the family. As we grow up within our family we are life involved with our parents, siblings and not infrequently with a variety of other relatives, neighbors and friends. We may or may not like everything about the way we have learned to live from such life involvement, but the fact is that we have learned our lessons well. We have become very much like those with whom we have associated.

The question that I am asking concerning the method of presentation is, if we seek to bring about genuine solid, deep, behavioral change in the people to whom we try to communicate the Christian message, can it be effectively done via monolog? Jesus seldom, if ever, monologued. Is it possible he rejected this method of communication because he considered it inadequate for the purposes he had in mind? Did he, on the other hand, choose life involvement as his method because he knew that this was the only adequate method for accomplishing his purpose? If so, could it be that we have been misled into depending heavily upon a method that the Church has learned more from Greek orators than from Jesus?

2. In the second place I would like to ask, what type of message is appropriate to each method of presentation? Though we may note that solid behavior change seldom results from monolog presentations, we also observe that much of value can be accomplished. Perhaps, then, the problem is not so much that one method is appropriate in all contexts while the other method is never appropriate, as it is that we learn to use each method in the context in which each is most appropriate.

Indeed, suppose you have a general message about which there is some urgency such as, "Your house is on fire." It would, I think, be poor advice to suggest that such a message be presented via dialog or life involvement! Monolog is the proper method for that kind of message. Likewise for a general message such as "Two and two are four." Unless you are in the initial stages of teaching someone basic addition it is unlikely that a communicator would take the time involved to dialog that message either. News broadcasts and other presentations of a purely informational nature are also effectively presented via monolog.

If, however, your aim is to affect your receptors at a deeper level than simply the information level, it is likely that monolog will not adequately serve your purpose, unless, of course, what you present (via monolog) connects strongly with one or more of the felt needs of your receptors. In that case, as I have pointed out, nearly any method will work because the receptor is so anxious for the material presented that he/she will accept it and appropriate it no matter what form it comes in. But for situations that go beyond the

A TYPOLOGY OF APPROACHES

CHARACTERISTIC		Approach I (Monolog)	
1.	Method of presentation	Monolog/lecture	
2.	Appropriate type of message	General messages	
3.	Appropriate audience	Large groups	
4.	Time required for given amount of information	Small amount	
5.	Formality of situation	Formal dominant	
6.	Character of communicator	Reputation important	
7.	Focus of participants	Source dominant (message)	
8.	Activity of receptor	Passive—merely listens	
9.	Consciousness of main message	High (both source and receptor)	
10.	Reinforcement and retention	Low	
11.	Feedback and adjustment	Little opportunity	
12.	Discovery by receptor	Little—message predigested	
13.	Type of identification	Source identifies primarily with message	
14.	Impact on receptor	Low—unless felt need met	
15.	Appropriate aim of approach	Increase knowledge	

TO COMMUNICATION

Approach II Approach III

(Dialog) (Life Involvement)

Dialog/discussion Life involvement

Specific to thinking behavior Specific to total behavior

Small groups Individuals or very small groups

Medium amount Large amount

Informal prominent Informal dominant

Personality characteristics Total behavior important

important

Message prominent (source-Receptor prominent (source-

receptor) message)

Considerable mental activity Total life involvement

Medium Low (perhaps contradictory ver-

bal message

Medium High

Considerable opportunity Maximum opportunity

Maximum opportunity for Considerable discovery

discovery

Reciprocal identification with Reciprocal source-receptor identieach other's ideas

fication on personal level over all

of life

Potential high on thinking Maximum on total behavior

Influence thinking Influence total behavior mere presentation of information to receptors who do not have a strong felt need for the message, some other approach is likely to be necessary if our aim is to bring about some change in the receptor.

For this purpose we can recommend dialog as an appropriate way to seek to bring about change in the receptors' thinking behavior. Dialog, of course, is a type of life involvement. It is, however, very often quite limited with respect to time, place and the extent of the areas within the lives of the participants over which involvement takes place. But for wrestling with differences in the thinking of the participants, dialog might be quite adequate.

If, however, the aim of the message is to affect the receptors' total behavior, the depth and breadth of the change brought about is quite dependent upon the ability of the receptor first to realize what is being recommended and then to imitate it. And this involves what psychologists call "modeling." Though it is possible for receptors to imagine Christian models or, on occasion, to be able to recall previous experiences with such models, the most effective modeling comes from live involvement between the communicator and the receptors. In the preceding chapters, I have already dealt with many of the aspects of a life involvement approach to communicating Christianity. This is, I believe, merely another way of talking about an incarnational methodology.

3. These methods differ with respect to the appropriate size of audience. With very large audiences, monolog is perhaps the only possibility. It usually does not work very well to attempt to dialog with a large group. And life involvement with very many is completely out. To some extent, of course, we are life involved even when we monolog with a large group. But this is in a very minimal way and the few things receptors learn from such life involvement with lecturers center largely around getting used to the lecturer's style, mannerisms, facial and vocal expression and the like. The general rule, then, is large groups for monolog, smaller groups for dialog, and still smaller groups for life involvement.

Could Jesus have operated in a life involvement way with more than twelve disciples? Probably not. In fact, even with dialog the numbers involved cannot be very large. Notice what happens to Sunday School classes when the attendance grows beyond, say, twenty-five to thirty. If the class continues to use a dialog format, the number on the roll may continue to rise but the attendance will usually level off at about twenty-five to thirty at most. This seems to be the optimum number for dialog in our society. If the number attending the class gets to be much larger than this, the teacher will ordinarily change to a monolog method. Almost invariably, when there are large Sunday School classes, they are conducted on a monolog basis. We don't seem to be able to handle discussion with more than a small number of people. And with apprenticeship or discipleship, the number that can be handled is even smaller.

4. Our fourth consideration is to ask the question, given a certain amount of material to be gotten across, how much time would each method require? In a monolog format, it doesn't take very much time to present a fairly large amount of information. Note, however, that it is merely information that is being presented, rather than something that is likely to have a greater impact on the receptor.

I believe our attachment to preaching and lecturing has affected Christianity enormously at this point. By using a monolog format so exclusively, we have come to treat Christian communication as primarily the passing of large amounts of information from communicators to receptors. Thus, we have come to focus primarily on information we should know in order to be Christians rather than on learning a life that is to be lived. I believe this is a serious distortion of the Christian message. The amount of crucial information involved in Christianity is, I believe, quite small. The amount of Christian behavior demanded in response to that information is, however, quite large. We have, however, given ourselves to a methodology that emphasizes the lesser of the two ingredients.

Be that as it may, it is clear that a monolog method is better at presenting large amounts of information, while a life involvement method is better at applying smaller amounts of information to larger areas of behavior. Dialog, then, fits somewhere in between. The amount of information that can be presented in a given amount of time via dialog is not very great, especially when compared with monolog. But it is certainly greater than is possible with life involvement.

- 5. The fifth consideration is a matter of the formality of the situation. Though not all monolog situations are extremely formal, they tend to be more formal than either dialog or life involvement. Life involvement situations, on the other hand, tend to be considerably less formal than either of the other two. Dialog/discussion situations fall somewhere in between. Formality affects communicational impact by defining the social distance between communicator and receptors. If that social distance is perceived by the receptors to be great, that fact will affect the kind and nature of the messages at every point. Likewise, if the social distance is perceived to be small and the relationship between the communicator and receptors perceived to be intimate.
- 6. In the sixth place, I would like to raise the matter of the perceived character of the communicator. In general, the greater the social distance entailed in the communicational situation, the more important the reputation of the communicator is to that situation. When deciding whether or not to attend a lecture, we are greatly concerned with whether that person has the credentials, the reputation to enable him to deal with the topic in a helpful way. Advertisements for lectures, therefore, focus strongly on the credentials of the lecturer. In such formalized situations, there is little opportunity for the receptors to assess for themselves the overall credibility of the communicator, except as he/she deals with that subject in that situation. It is highly desirable, therefore, that the trust level of the audience already be high before the communicator makes his/her presentation.

In dialog, and especially in life involvement situations, there is much more opportunity for receptors to make their own assessment of the communicator's ability. Though it is still desirable for the communicator to be perceived as credible and trustworthy going into the communicational situation, there is much more opportunity for receptors to modify their original opinions of the communicator in more intimate communicational situations. Often, for example, receptors go away from a lecture situation with essentially the same attitude toward the speaker with which they started. In more intimate situations, however, receptors are often much more impressed with the communicator, both with respect to his subject matter and with respect to him/herself as a person.

On the other hand, students exposed to teachers over small periods of time in classroom situations are often quite impressed with their teachers as long as their exposure is limited to those formalized situations. If, however, a student gets to know the teacher in other areas of life, he/she may discover some things about that teacher that cause revision of his/her opinion downward, even to the point of discounting the validity of the things communicated by the teacher in the classroom. This of course, quite often works the other way as well, especially with respect to teachers who might not be particularly effective in formalized classroom situations who happen to be outstanding persons overall.

7. In monolog situations, furthermore, the focus of the participants is squarely on the source, with the message also in focus but to a lesser extent. Receptors are much less in focus. The chairs are set up in such a way that everyone faces the communicator. All eyes are on the front of the room. It is expected that people will sit quietly and take all of their cues from the speaker rather than from anyone or anything else in the room.

In a dialog situation, on the other hand, there is often an attempt to arrange the furniture in a circle, downplaying the importance of the leader to some extent. The discussion, then, will focus on grappling with the subject by means of a lively interchange between leader and receptors. Thus the message comes into greater prominence as do the receptors, while the prominence of the communicator diminishes a bit in comparison to his/her prominence in a monolog situation. In life involvements, then, it is the needs of the receptors that come strongly into focus. The activity of the communicator and the nature of the messages are bent to the meeting of the particular needs of the receptors. In Jesus' case, though he was in complete control at all times, the choice of the subjects with which he dealt and the manner in which he dealt with them shows a strong primary focus on meeting the needs of his followers.

8. As pointed out in chapter four, receptors are not inactive. In a monolog situation, however, receptors tend to be considerably less active than in discussion and life involvement situations. When we listen to lectures or sermons, we basically just sit there. Things are going on in our minds and, at least in classroom situations, we may

be taking notes. But our activity is often the more mechanical activity of simply ingesting the materials as they are presented, rather than the more demanding activity of considering the material in relation to our total life experience with a view toward incorporating new ideas into our lives.

It is that kind of activity, however, that discussion and life involvement communication force us into. This is why many people dislike more intimate communicational situations where they will be forced to answer questions or in other ways to expose whatever deep level interaction with the material is going on within their minds and hearts. They consider such a process too threatening to be comfortable.

9. Given the fact that in every communicational situation there is a multiplicity of messages being sent, we ask, what the level of consciousness of the main message might be in each of these approaches to communication? In a monolog situation, of course, the intention of the communicator is that the main message will be strongly in focus. And, unless the speaker acts in such a way as to distract from the main message, or unless something else distracting happens while he/she is presenting that message it is likely that that message will be in primary focus. If, however, the communicator breaks some rules by, say, standing too close to certain of the members of his audience, or by belching during the course of his presentation or by wandering around the room during the presentation, it will be these strange things rather than the main message that will be remembered.

In discussion situations, and particularly in life involvement situations, however, the messages communicated regularly go far beyond the main message. Messages concerning the openness of the communicator, his/her kindness, patience, ability to deal with problems that he/she may not have anticipated, ability to integrate the things about which he/she speaks into his/her own life, and similar messages are often strongly communicated along with the main message. Indeed, for many of the receptors the way in which the communication is dealt with becomes a more important message than the primary topic itself. Not infrequently, then, these additional messages, technically known as "paramessages," cancel out much or

all of the main message. This leads, then, to responses such as, "Your life speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you're saying."

In life involvement, it is often the tone of voice or the timing of the message that indicates to the receptor that the most important message is not the one being verbalized. Often, for example, a sharp or angry response has more to do with the communicator's discomfort than with the receptor's needs. Such a situation is indicated, for example, by the reported response of a bright child when her mother told her to go to bed. Her response was, "Mommy, how come when you get tired, I have to go to bed?" The mother might well have felt that she was communicating only the "go to bed" message. But the perceptive child picked up a paramessage that was probably more accurate as an explanation of the situation than the message the mother wanted to be in focus. In life involvement, then, what is communicated goes far beyond what might be regarded as the main message.

10. Learning is highly dependent upon what is termed "reinforcement." That is, messages that we hear once and never again, tend to be crowded out by messages that we hear over and over again in a variety of ways and applied to a variety of contexts. Our tenth point is, therefore, a consideration of the opportunity for reinforcement and the consequent likelihood that the receptor will retain the messages presented via each of these approaches.

The monolog approach, of course, due to such factors as the generality of the messages, the large amounts of information involved, and the small amount of interpersonal contact between communicator and receptors, provides little opportunity for the messages to be reinforced and is, therefore, likely to result in low retention on the part of the receptor. Dialog provides considerably more opportunity for reinforcement and, therefore, much more likelihood of retention. Life involvement, then, is especially adapted to provide large amounts of reinforcement and to result in correspondingly large amounts of retention.

Note, for example, what happens to reinforcement and retention when, after a lecture, the audience engages in a lively discussion with the communicator concerning certain of his/her points. The communicator, then, has opportunity to illustrate, to explain, and to

apply certain of his/her points much more fully. Receptors will typically respond to such a situation by indicating that they now have a much higher level of understanding than they obtained from the lecture. If, then, a certain few of those who listened to the lecture and participated in the discussion are able to spend long periods of informal time with the lecturer, perhaps even living with him/her for awhile, his/her ability to reinforce the message and their ability to retain are increased enormously. Pastors should know that the ability of their hearers to retain messages presented in their sermons is substantially increased by visitation and other informal techniques designed to increase a life involvement relationship between themselves and their hearers.

11. Feedback and the opportunity of the communicator to adjust his/her message on the basis of that feedback is of great importance in the process of communication. There is, of course, little opportunity for feedback in a monolog situation, more opportunity in a discussion situation and a maximum opportunity in a life involvement situation. An audience who perceives that the communicator has chosen the wrong message in a monolog situation may, therefore, have little opportunity to let him/her know in hopes of some adjustment.

In a life involvement situation, on the other hand, there is maximum opportunity for the hearers to get such a message back to the communicator and a high likelihood that if the communicator does not make the proper adjustments, his/her audience will leave. Indeed, the formal nature of most monolog situations is often the only thing that keeps the audience from completely dissipating.

12. All of this has great implications for the amount of discovery learning the receptors may engage in. As we have seen in chapter 2, discovery learning is the most impactful kind and the kind that Jesus employed. Monolog, of course, emphasizes the predigestion of the message at the expense of discovery on the part of the receptors. Life involvement, on the other hand, specializes in leading receptors to discovery. Discussion is somewhere between these two extremes. In dialog and life involvement situations especially, and to a lesser extent in response to certain sermons and lectures, we find people saying, "Wow, I never thought of that before." Such com-

ments are an indication of discovery learning. We find the disciples making comments like that throughout their experience with Jesus.

13. The primary type of identificational process is the thirteenth characteristic in our typology. In a monolog approach it seems as though the source attempts to identify primarily with his/her message and perhaps to a lesser extent with the receptors. In dialog, on the other hand, the identification seems to be more reciprocal between communicator and receptor, though often primarily at the idea level. Life involvement, then, involves reciprocal identification between source and receptor at a highly personal level and over the whole of their lives.

In terms of what I have said above, concerning the importance of the receptors identifying with the communicator, it is easy to see the superiority of dialog and life involvement as communicational techniques. I will suggest below certain modifications that can be made in monolog presentations to overcome the more disastrous possibilities of that approach in this regard.

14. All of this leads to an assessment of the communicational impact on the receptors of communication employing each of these approaches. The impact via monolog is likely to be quite low unless one or both of the following situations exist: (a) The felt needs of the receptors for the material being presented are high, or (b) the communicator makes the kind of adjustments in his presentation that I speak about below. Dialog communication, on the other hand, has high potential for impact at least on people's thinking behavior. Life involvement, then, has the potential for maximum impact on the total behavior of the receptors.

In employing sermons, lectures, or the kind of written medium that I am employing here, we count on at least certain members of our audiences coming to the situation with a need for what we are presenting. Our ability to communicate effectively to them, then, is highly dependent upon our ability to guess where their felt needs lie. Sometimes, of course, we guess very well. On other occasions, however our guesses may be quite wide of the mark. Certain communicators, furthermore, seem to be either unconcerned or unable to guess well at any time. Others, happily, seem to be able to regularly transcend the probability factors in their ability to communicate

effectively via monolog. Some of the reasons for this may lie in the factors that I discuss below.

15. I ask, therefore, as point fifteen, what the appropriate expectation should be in our use of these three approaches. It seems that if our aim is simply to increase the knowledge of the receptors, monolog is the appropriate method. If, however, we seek to solidly influence the thinking of our receptors, we should use a dialog/discussion method. Influencing total behavior, however, demands much more total life involvement than either of the other methods affords.

As mentioned previously, monolog can be effectively used much like a display in a store window, to alert people to the good things that await them once they get beyond that display. Monolog is also good at bringing people to make decisions they have been considering for a long time. Monolog can, furthermore, be usefully employed to support people in decisions they have already made. This is probably the major function that sermonizing serves in our churches and over the mass media.

Studies of the use of sermons via radio and television point out, however, that very few people who do not already agree with the communicator either listen to the presentation or have their opinions affected by them. And those who do have their opinions changed via mass media are almost always those whose felt needs predispose them to be positive toward the kind of change there advocated. Even then, however, the durability of the opinion change is highly dependent upon the continued reinforcement of a group of like-minded people. This is one of the primary functions of the church within Christianity.

Monolog enables us to present large amounts of information in a relatively efficient way. The church's over-dependence on monolog has, however, as I have indicated above, led us into what I regard as a serious heresy—the heresy of regarding Christian orthodoxy as primarily a matter of correct thinking, rather than a matter of correct relationship issuing in correct behavior. This has, I believe, even led many evangelicals to unconsciously advocate a kind of "salvation by knowledge" doctrine in place of what Scripture teaches—salvation by faithfulness.

Dialog, too, can be a primarily intellectual knowledge kind of thing. Even though the method may be superior communicationally, if the content is purely cognitive, we may still have botched the message we are called to communicate. With life involvement, however, it is much more difficult to present a purely cognitive message, since the overall message presented via this means relates so thoroughly to all of life. This method, therefore, provides a considerable corrective to the intellectualizing of the Christian message, provided our example is properly a Christian one.

The contrast I am getting at between the kinds of messages via these methods was nicely pointed out to me by an African who said, "You Euro-Americans are primarily concerned with intellectual heresy. We Africans are more concerned with interpersonal heresy." I think what he was getting at is at the heart of the Scriptural message—that the real Christian message lies in the behavior of the messenger rather than in his/her words. Christians who behave as Christians relate in Christian ways to other people, whether or not these people agree with them intellectually. Euro-American Christianity, however, has turned so completely to a concern for knowledge, information and doctrine, that it frequently occurs that we defend our doctrine at the expense of relating even to fellow Christians in a Christian way. It is my feeling, therefore, that even a discussion of the communicational techniques that we employ should lead us into a critical evaluation of the actual message that our receptors perceive us to be advocating.

What If One Is Limited to Monolog?

Having considered all these things, though, we need to ask if there is anything we can do to increase the effectiveness of our communication in non-ideal situations. That is, suppose I find myself in a church situation or even a classroom situation, or even worse in a situation where I must attempt to communicate via writing, can I make any adjustments that will increase the impact of my communication while minimizing the less desirable characteristics of the medium I am forced to employ? The answer is that there is indeed much that can be done to bring our audiences to experience more

of the kind of impact that characterizes dialog and life involvement communication, even when we are limited to monolog presentations. Though sub-ideal techniques such as monolog and writing do not permit a high degree of life involvement between communicator and receptors, it is possible to increase the amount of such involvement and thereby to increase the communicational impact.

The above chart of approaches to communication can be looked at as a kind of scale with monolog at one end of the scale and life involvement at the other end. If, therefore, we look at certain of the items on that chart, we will discover that at least certain of the characteristics of dialog and life involvement can be approximated in a monolog situation. If this is done, then, at least certain of the members of our audiences may be able to fill in the gaps and, by imagining themselves in a full life involvement situation with us, to get beyond the more crippling effects of formalized monolog.

If, for example, at point 2 on the chart, the communicator refrains from presenting simply general information and makes his/her message more specific to the actual lives of the receptors, he/she is likely to increase the impact of the presentation. This will, of course, mean that he/she will need to take more time for the presentation, dealing with a smaller amount of material (see point 4) rather than the smaller amount of time dealing with larger amounts of material that usually characterizes monolog presentations. He/she will illustrate the points more fully and, in keeping with point 6 and much of the material presented in chapters 2 and 3 concerning identification, let the receptors hear considerably more about his/her own personal experience than is often done in monolog.

This will, of course, involve the reduction of the formality of the situation (point 5). Even though the method of presentation is monologic, the speaker may come across more as one who is conducting a conversation, one who is participating with his/her hearers not only in verbalizing, but even in other areas of life. A communicator may, as in conversation, reduce the material presented to a single point wrapped in true to life illustrations, many of which relate to his/her own personal experience.

I well recall one preacher who did this extremely well. He never had more than one point but he illustrated it in a variety of ways and from a variety of perspectives. Because those illustrations bring about a kind of pseudo-life involvement, we found it very easy to get wrapped up in what the speaker was communicating and to get beyond such superficial characteristics of the communicational situation as the speaker's reputation and his focus on his message (point 7). I remember feeling frequently that I and I alone was in focus. I, furthermore, found myself getting much more involved (point 8) in the application of what the speaker was saying to my own experience and the integration of his perspectives into my perspective. Jesus, of course, did this very well when he used true to life stories that we call parables.

Now, we should be warned that not all decrease of formality and increase of the personalness of the communicator automatically increases the impact of communication. Often such breaking of the rules can be taken quite badly by the receptors. Say, for example, the communicator stands on the pulpit rather than standing behind it. His receptors would probably object. Or, suppose the communicator is not careful about the personal things revealed concerning him/herself or others. He/she might reveal intimate details that are considered quite inappropriate in public and thereby seriously hinder the communication.

Or, suppose he/she is perceived as showing off his/her ability to tell clever stories rather than enhancing the message by means of these stories. The communication is likely to be seriously hindered thereby, or at least, the message that is actually communicated may be something quite different from the message that the speaker supposedly intended. If a communicator is psychologically insecure, for example, he/she may latch onto some of the techniques that I am recommending as means of enhancing his/her own prestige rather than enhancing the communication of the message.

A further adaptation that can often be made is to increase the effectiveness of the feedback and adjustment process (point 11). Some speakers are quite effective in raising questions that the audience is generally concerned with. A speaker may say, for example, something like, "You are probably asking such and such a question." If he/she has hit on a question that the audience actually is asking, they will say to themselves, "Sure enough, I am asking that question.

I wonder what he/she is going to say about it." So the involvement of the receptor is increased (point 8) by the communicator's setting up of a fictitious though realistic feedback situation.

Or, the communicator might elicit actual feedback by asking a question the audience will answer. This technique may be less feasible in a preaching situation, particularly on Sunday morning. However, not infrequently it is possible to raise questions the audience can answer with a nod of the head or a shake of the head rather than verbally. Often, furthermore, it is possible for a communicator to develop a sensitivity to the feedback sent by the hearers via the expressions on their faces or other gestures to such an extent that he/she can respond by adjusting the message on the spot. Some communicators even plant people in the audience to provide such feedback for them. Pastors' wives are often good at this.

In monolog situations we may also increase the possibility of discovery (point 12). Sometimes it is a good idea for us to ask questions that we don't even intend to answer directly. In this way we may stimulate people to think about these questions and to go out and grapple with them on their own. Jesus very often did this. Sometimes, furthermore, he would answer a question with another question. Even this might be possible in certain monolog presentations. Often via a series of monolog presentations it may be possible to lead people into discovery of a new perspective. Questions relating to the adequacy of the old perspective and pointed illustrations demonstrating the greater adequacy of the new perspective can play an important part in leading people to this kind of discovery.

These techniques, and probably several others I have not mentioned, can do much to bring about the right kind of identification between the receptor and the communicator (point 13). As pointed out in chapters 2 and 3, communicational impact is directly related to the ability of the receptor to identify with the source. Self-disclosure on the part of the communicator is often crucial to bringing about such "reverse identification." When people in the audience can say, "That person may be a preacher (or teacher, etc.), but he/she is just like me" the potential impact of even monolog communication can be increased enormously. Or, if a significant number of those in the audience have entered into life involvement experi-

ences with the communicator (even, for example, on the golf course), the effectiveness of material presented via monolog can be enhanced. When the communicator is known as a human being, rather than simply by reputation (point 6), even monolog communication can be very effective because it then becomes a part of a total life involvement.

In summary, it has been my intent in this and the preceding chapters to advocate incarnational, life involvement communication to Christian communicators. I have approached the subject from the perspective of communication theory, on the one hand, and from the example of God through Christ on the other. I have generalized to a considerable extent in order to cover a large amount of material in a fairly short presentation. I have furthermore, employed a technique (writing) that is more like those techniques I do not recommend than those I do. I would rather have entered into person to person life involvement with you the receptors. But, in order to get some of these ideas across to a wider audience I have settled for writing. Nevertheless, I am in hopes that the felt needs that exist within you will make it possible for at least some of this material to be useful to you.



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