

Building-blocks for a Christian vision of communication

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What makes for good communication? This is, of course, a highly subjective question that can only evoke highly subjective answers. It all depends on what one's values are – for good or evil. It is a matter of values and of ethics.

Does the Christian faith provide us with any criteria by which – from that particular angle – we could discern good communication from bad communication? At this point, I should make it clear that, for me, there is no such thing as Christian communication. Christians may communicate, and they do, just like anyone else, but that does not convert communication to Christianity.

However, the Christian faith certainly has something to say about both communication and communicators. In this article, my intention is to delve into the Bible to see if I can find some clues about what communication is all about from a Christian perspective. Hopefully, in this way some building blocks can be found for what could be called a Christian vision of communication.

In doing so, I realise, that the Bible, in a way, is a box of bricks. It is full of truth and wisdom, but anyone who, like me, delves into its riches, is bound to be selective in the things he or she picks up, and which are left untouched. A Dutch saying says: 'ledere ketter heeft zijn letter' or there is a bible verse to support every heresy.

Even so, I will make an effort to select a number of bricks and pile them up. I hope that you, my esteemed reader, will like my little tower, and I am interested to see yours one day. Perhaps you will build on mine, or you may feel that you have to knock it down and start anew... Let our shared comfort be that, although our fancy constructions may not last for eternity, the building blocks certainly will!

Opening up

The first two chapters of the Bible provide us with two wonderful stories about how God created the world and how he made his first beginnings with mankind. The best known story is, of course, how God created the heavens and the earth and how he turned the earth into a paradise within six days (Genesis 1). Every day witnesses another magnificent creative work taking place, and again and again we hear God's affirmation 'that it was good'.

What strikes me in the second creation story (Genesis 2: 4-25), is that we hear God say, 'It is not good'. After the creation of man and putting him in charge of the Garden of Eden, 'the Lord God said: 'It is not good for the man to be alone'' (Genesis 2: 18). Then all the beasts and birds that God had made are brought to the man, but 'no suitable helper was found'.

Again, we note a striking difference with the first creation story, where the whole process is characterised by perfection: all was good. In this second story, however, the creative process is shown as one of 'trial and error'. God tries to find a companion for man among the beasts and the birds – but to no avail.

Eugen Drewermann goes as far as suggesting that God needs to learn from his own creature.¹ 'So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'' (Genesis 2:20-23).

Without doubt, there are many levels of meaning in this story. What strikes me now is that, for man not to be alone anymore, it is necessary to open him up and to take a bit of his own substance out!

This provides me with my first building brick: communication with a fellow human being requires that I open up and that I offer something of my own 'for grabs' for the other – in order for the other to become who he or she should be. It means that true communication requires investment, that it is risky, potentially dangerous and painful. Opening up to the other also means that the other can look into me, may 'enter' me – it makes me vulnerable.

The story also tells us that, since the other is 'of my own substance', I can never be complete without the other, just like the other can never be complete without me. Therefore, for a human being to be truly human, he or she will always have to follow the urge to communicate and never to stop taking risks by opening up to the other. It is easily said, but it can take a lifetime to come to terms with such an axiom.

Jesus has in fact laid out the very same principle to us in his parable of the Good Samaritan. It is one of Jesus' best known, but least understood stories.

The story is about a man who travels from Jerusalem to Jericho. He is attacked by robbers who beat him up severely and leave him by the side of the road to die. A priest arrives on the scene. He sees the wounded man, but hurries past him. Later, a Levite (a temple servant) comes by, but he reacts in the same manner. Then, a Samaritan traveller arrives. The wounded man (a Jew) loses all hope, because Jews and Samaritans hate each other. Surprisingly, it is the Samaritan who shows mercy – even abundantly: he treats his wounds, transports him to the next inn and pays for all his needs.

It is a beautiful story and it has served Christians through the ages to motivate and inspire their works of charity, because the story is taken to suggest that a follower of Christ should do good to everybody, even to his or her enemy.

This is certainly true, but it leaves out the sharpest angle of the story. The story is Jesus' response to a question in a debate on how to love one's neighbour (a divine law!). The question was: 'Who is my neighbour?' In other words: 'Where should we draw the line?' And Jesus returns the question, after telling the Samaritan's story: 'Which of the three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' (Luke 10:36).

Of course it was the Samaritan. So, if we have to love our neighbour, we have to love the Samaritan. The ultimate consequence of Jesus' story is that we should, in fact, love everyone as if our life depended on it – or even because our life depends on it. Tomorrow it may be me, who is lying in the road, bleeding to death – and my life will depend on whoever is coming down the road. Therefore, Jesus suggests, you had better love everyone today – it may save your life.

It is a repetition and a deepening of the same truth of Genesis 2: I cannot really be me without giving of myself to the other and vice versa.

What this might mean in today's communication practice, is shown for instance in WACC's struggle against HIV/Aids in Sub Saharan Africa, where the main effort is to 'open up' people to reality and, most of all, to each other:

'Working with partner organisations in Ghana and Rwanda and in collaboration with the Africa Regional Committee of WACC and its members, WACC seeks to tackle HIV/Aids stigma and

discrimination through communication by working with religious leaders and educators, community leaders and communicators from the wider faith based community. (The project) will focus on increasing awareness of stigma and discrimination including its impact on women, the development of communication tools and empowerment through training in communication and advocacy skills to enable the faith based community to take the lead in combating HIV/Aids stigma and discrimination.’²

Making a difference

The God of the Bible is peculiar in that He chooses to communicate with people. He is actually seeking their company. He wants to walk with them (Genesis 3: 8). He wants to eat with them (Exodus 24: 11). The way God communicates always brings something about. It changes things. It creates new things. It does not return ‘empty’. Word and action are one.

This brings me to my second brick: true communication brings about change. It serves a purpose. It brings things and people in motion. It incites and it stimulates. Above all: it calls for a response. It is by the grace of the response and of the chain of messages and responses that may follow that communication actually becomes communication.

What ‘making a difference’ through communication can mean in practical terms is shown in the following example from the Africa section of WACC’s 2005 Project List:

‘The Christian Council of Mozambique (...) played a key role in securing an end to the 19 year old civil war and since then has been actively involved in the reconciliation and reconstruction process. The “turning weapons into tools” project (TAE) provides civic education, assists the reintegration of demobilised soldiers into a civilian life, co-ordinates the removal and destruction of offensive weapons and encourages the use of weapons scrap in the creation of works of art. Funding is now sought for a two-year project aimed at publicising the success of the project (...) to share the experience with other countries faced with similar problems of reconciliation and reconstruction.’³

Listening

Opening up to the other is a need for us to reach out to the other. As stated before, it also provides an inroad for the other to enter our own sphere. It gives us the ability to hear the other. It makes it possible for us to listen to what the other has to say, to offer to us. It enables us to be

moved by it and to respond. It makes us response-able.

The great liberating act of God for his people, enslaved by the Egyptian Pharaoh, could only happen because God himself turned out to be response-able: 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them' (Exodus 3:7).

This is the third brick we find: the catalyst role communication can play for liberation. It is one of the most powerful aspects of communication: to see, to hear the hardships of others (without whom we cannot be ourselves), to be concerned, and to become an agent of change.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of WACC in 2000, I made a plea for another name for the organisation: to turn the World Association for Christian Communication into a World Alliance of Christian Communicators. Fortunately, there are many signs that WACC is really moving in the direction of becoming a community of agents of change – which is certainly more important than just a change of name.

It is not always easy to discern which voices to listen to and which voices need our response, our responsibility. Jesus made it clear what voices to look for if we want to discern the will of God: not the voices from the centres of power but the voices from the margins, from the periphery. Discerning the one from the other will make the difference between the 'sheep' and the 'goats' at the Last Judgement, so Jesus tells us:

'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me"' (Matthew 25: 34-36).

In our own time, should not followers of Christ strain their ears to hear the voices of the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers of our days, make their voices heard by others and act for change? Dr. Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, recently summed up whose voices we should be looking for:

'There are so many such voices in our midst: the abused and the vulnerable, women, children, refugees, unemployed youth and migrant workers, those suffering and dying of HIV and AIDS and

other diseases, the faint voices of women and children who are trafficked, of political detainees, of the Dalits and Indigenous peoples, of those peoples' movements for freedom and justice and for the plundered earth. These voices – in contrast to the dominant voices – cry out for life, justice and peace, for fairness and for a life of dignity, and for the integrity of all forms of life and for the relational nature of life'.⁴

It is these voices of today that call for the response of responsible communicators. A concrete example of such a response is the 'Voices from the Margins' Project of the Protestant Centre for Pentecostal Studies (CEEP) in Chile:

'The areas of southern Chile where CEEP carries out its work have been identified by the authorities as ones with high levels of crime, drug addiction, alcoholism and poverty. The aim of this project is to bring media awareness to the many and diverse social and church organisations in the provinces of Boca Sur and Michajue through seminars and workshops in order to encourage the creation of grassroots and alternative communication systems. It is also planned to stimulate the establishment of a local network of communicators, which will become the voice of the many organisations that work in the region.'⁵

To be true

It is in line with the choice of voices that we spoke about, that the matter of truth should be viewed. Telling the truth is a major value in all communication. However, in the dominant culture of today it appears that those who have the power and resources can determine another kind of 'truth'. Public control of the media landscape – which at the best of times covered only a minor part of the globe – is disappearing rapidly in favour of business conglomerates and wealthy media tycoons.

Jesus makes it clear that there is no such thing as an objective, 'neutral' truth. Truth is always related to the choices we make – the choice on whose side we stand: the side of the powerful, the successful, the mighty, or the side of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger. It is here that we find the fourth building brick: truth is not so much about what we say – it is about who we are. 'I am the truth', Jesus said (John 14: 6).

Jesus is careful not to 'tell' any truths. He did not leave us a legacy of dogmas. What he did do was to tell stories about ordinary people and ordinary things, stories that carry within them a truth that has to be discovered, like a hidden treasure. Jesus told parables. In fact, Mark tells us that 'He did not say anything to them without using a parable' (Mark 4:34).

The 'truth' of Jesus takes seriously the people around him and their daily life and struggles. His parables are no ready-made truisms, but stories that are recognised immediately and that invite the hearer to do his or her own thinking.

Good communication that follows this tradition, therefore, does not 'parachute' truths into the audience, but is true to the audience, in that it incites it and provides it with the tools to discover the truth by itself and within the context of its own life, language and culture.

For a number of years, WACC's Development Initiative Programme has provided indispensable support to many communication initiatives of that kind:

'In a world of continuing change, especially in communication technology, traditional forms of media, particularly those that enable community, must not be overlooked and indeed need to be strengthened. At the same time, there is an ever greater need to press for the democratisation of communication, following the decline of "public" communication channels. This changing communication environment has also had a detrimental impact on a communication ethic that espoused participation, access and dialogue and that was built on the foundations of truth and solidarity.'⁶

Communication for community

'Communication for Community' was the well chosen slogan for WACC's first Congress (Manila, 1989). It is a slogan worth repeating again and again, because community is the ultimate aim of God's creation and of His plan for the world. All the commandments that God gave to his people served this one purpose: that they might live together and with Him, free from bondage, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

He makes a Covenant with them: He wants to be their God and wants them to be His people. As stated before, this God eats with His people, he walks with them, discusses things with them, listens to them – almost as equals. God seeks community – among humankind and between God and humankind.

It is especially in the Gospel of John that Jesus speaks strongly about his desire to be one with his friends and followers. He uses several images (parables!) to express this. One such image is the vine: 'I am the vine; you are the branches. (...) If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you' (John 15: 5, 7).

Another image is that of bread: 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. (...) Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him' (John 6: 35, 56).

Truly passionate is Jesus' prayer for unity between his followers, himself and his Father, on the eve of his death: 'I (...) pray for those who will believe in me (...) that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us (...). I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me' (John 17: 20-23).

The fifth and final brick we find here is that good communication builds unity, builds community. A striking example in our days of 'communication in action for community' – in an extremely difficult context – is provided by the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC):

'The FMEEC is the co-ordinating body of ecumenically minded Protestant churches in the Middle East, including those in Iraq. (...) Iraq is a country in economic, political and social turmoil and the need for reconciliation and peace has never been more important. To address these issues and to encourage the Protestant community in Iraq to contribute to the rebuilding of their country, FMEEC has developed a project to train Iraqi youth leaders from the Protestant community to positively engage in peace-building and conflict resolution.'⁷

This is, indeed, an impressive example of our final brick: communication for community. In essence, this final brick is not much different from the very first, which was about the risky job of opening up to the other. While the dream, in this example, of a new community, a new society is evident, so are the risks attached to taking such an initiative.

And so we have come full circle. What we have found is that true communication is about people who dare to open up to one another. It is about people who are ready to give of themselves and to receive the gifts of others in order for all to become truly human. It is about people who give themselves as the living building blocks of a new community:

'where the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years. (...) They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit' (Isaiah 65: 19-21).

Notes

1 Eugen Drewermann: Wort des Heils – Wort der Heilung: von der befreienden Kraft des Glaubens: Gespräche und Interviews. Düsseldorf, Patmos, 1988-1989; Dutch translation: Eugen Drewermann, Een ruimte om te leven – Gesprekken. Zoetermeer, Meinema, 1992; p. 40.

2 WACC Projects 2005, p. 61.

3 Idem, p. 18.

4 Samuel Kobia: 'Listening to the Voice of God' – New Trends in the Ecumenical Movement. In The Ecumenical Review, Vol.57, Nr.2, April 2005; pp. 196-197.

5 WACC Projects 2005, pp. 40-41.

6 Idem, p. 59.

7 Idem, p. 49.

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