

The Role of the Christians in Communication
A Basis

This year the BBC is celebrating 50 years of broadcasting to the world. David Willis of the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote about this event:

For 50 years the BBC has brought balanced credible radio to millions of people around the world....

In the Middle East, India, Asia, Africa and Latin America where two-thirds of the globe's people live, the primary weapon of persuasion and propaganda is not newspapers or television. It is radio.

The number of radio sets has leaped from 250 million 25 years ago to more than 1.25 billion today, many of them shortwave. More than 80 countries now aim broadcasts abroad.

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Mass communications has become both the symbol and the tool of the impact of the world civilization upon the population of the globe. Today, there is no such thing as an isolated community in our world. The transistor radio has become ubiquitous!

Allow me here to reminisce about my pilgrimage with radio. The place was the city of Alexandretta in the province of Antioch, Syria. The year was 1936. King George V had died. The funeral service was being broadcast on the BBC in far away London. Our family did not have a radio, but our neighbors did. We went to their courtyard and I listened to the solemn Anglican liturgy, and for the first time in my life, I heard a choir sing: *Abide with Me*.

Forced to leave our ancestral home by the Turks in June 1939, our family moved to Beirut, Lebanon. My father bought an RCA Victor (model 1940) medium and short wave set. Just in time, to begin to listen to the news of the Second World War. We lived on radio, and especially on the BBC!

In 1960, two years after the beginning of the Arabic broadcast of The Back to God Hour, I purchased a Zenith All-transistor short wave set. Living in South Holland, Illinois, it became possible for me to monitor the Arabic and English programs beamed from radio station ELWA in Monrovia, Liberia to the lands of the Middle East and North Africa. During the last two decades, so much progress has occurred both in broadcasting and in radio receivers. The later model radio sets allow me to journey daily to the Arab world, not on the mythical carpet of Arabian Nights, but through a Sony receiver. It is too bad that our low horizons created by the North American tradition of AM/FM only, do not allow us to be fully aware of the ideological battles which are raging night and day all over the short wave bands!

I am so thankful that we are concerned as Christians of the Reformed tradition about the subject of Communications. The general topic of our conference is: “The Place of Christians in Communication –Today and Tomorrow.” I appreciate the concern for the immediate present as well as for the future, a future which recognizes only one limit: the Day of the Lord. Because of our faith commitment, our interest in communications does not allow us to limit ourselves to the areas of the technique and technology of communications, important as they are in their spheres. We must look for Holy Scripture’s guidance as we develop a truly Christian basis and rationale for communications and for our involvement in it as a Christian community.

The topic assigned to me by the steering committee of the Association for Reformed Communications is: “The Role of Christians in Communication – A Basis.” I hope to do justice to it as I develop it in the following way:

1. The Source: God, the prime communicator
2. The Agent: Man, the proclaimer of God’s communication
3. The Subject matter: the “what” of communication
4. The Goal: God’s glory & man’s welfare, the “why” of communication
5. The techniques and technology: the “how” of communication
6. The indispensable role of the Holy Spirit: the neglected “how” of communication

1. The Source: God, the prime communicator

What distinguishes our approach to the subject of communications from all the secularized ones is the fact that we start with God as the source of true communication. Christians of the Reformed tradition adhere to a thoroughly Biblical world view. We begin with God, the God of the Bible. We believe that God has spoken.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

Hebrews 1: 1,2 (NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

John 1: 1-5 (NIV)

These well known passages demonstrate in the clearest way that if we have anything to communicate, if we have anything to say, it is because of God’s prior communication. God has spoken. Even before the universe was created, there was communication between the three

persons of the Holy Trinity. Our Reformed fathers were very concerned about the subject of God's revelation of himself. In Article II of the Confession of Faith we read:

BY WHAT MEANS GOD IS MADE KNOWN UNTO US

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says (Rom. 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

So in order to have a sound basis for communication, we must begin with God. God has communicated with us and his communication is not beyond man's reach.

It pains me so much as I do my daily monitoring of the short wave bands that the vast majority of the radio stations either ignore God or actually and purposely spread an atheistic worldview. Just consider with me the statistics which deal with short wave broadcasting. I quote them from the article of David Willis which I alluded to at the beginning of this paper.

The Soviet Union . . . is well into a massive program to dominate shortwave bands. It leads all other countries in beaming 2,148 program hours a week in 84 languages around the world as of June 1982 – the equivalent of almost three months of 24-hour-a-day radio-every seven days.

The United States is in second place – 1,988 hours, but only in 48 languages. If taken together, the countries of Eastern Europe (heavily influenced by Moscow) come next with 1,653 hours in 27 languages. Then comes China (1,304 hours in 46 languages) and West Germany (786 hours in 39 languages). Only then comes the external service of the British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC, with 725 hours in 37 languages.

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If we really believe what we confess about God, his world and his Word, we must communicate our faith and its implications to the whole world. Christians cannot be silent.

2. The Agent: Man, the proclaimer of God's communication

From the Biblical point of view, man, i.e. redeemed man, must be very involved in communication. God, the primary communicator, has given man the task of communicating his Word to the world. Man, as enlightened by God, becomes the agent of communication. This role of servant or agent of God must be reaffirmed today by all those who are interested in communication from a truly Christian perspective. We do not communicate our autonomous human ideas or ideologies to the world. Christians are conscious of the fact that they have been saved to serve, to serve God and in his name, their fellow human beings. This profoundly Christian stance must mark all our theories and practices of communication. This is not an easy task, nor can it be undertaken in isolation from the other areas and spheres of knowledge. This

requires a thorough knowledge of the Word of God and a good acquaintance with the Christian heritage. Above all, the Christian communicator must be clothed with the garment of humility that comes from an experiential knowledge of his or her role as a servant of God. It is only the servants of God who do not tyrannize their fellow human beings in this century which has mastered the evil arts of disinformation and brainwashing.

3. The Subject matter: the “what” of communications

Lately, we have become very conscious of the material needs of the world. We speak of world hunger, the problems of chronic malnutrition, inadequate housing and population explosion in third world countries. Christians meet to discuss the importance of both Word and deed ministries. We are told that a balance ought to exist in the ministries of Kerygma and Diaconia. I don't want to appear as if I am unconcerned about these real issues and problems. Unfortunately, I fail to see an adequate emphasis being placed today on the spiritual hunger which plagues billions all over the globe! It is God himself who taught us that bread is important. He made us so that we cannot live without bread. But he also teaches us that man does not live by bread alone! Man needs desperately to hear the Word of God.

In my experience as a missionary and a broadcaster of the Word of God for almost a quarter of a century and after reading over 100,000 letters from every corner of the Arab world and the lands of dispersion, I must say that people everywhere are looking for a message which will brighten their existence and bring hope and healing to their broken lives. Whatever the West has done to the world during the last two hundred years, it has exported not only its technology but equally its secular philosophies and ideologies. In my reading of Arabic books, magazines and listeners' mail, I am always impressed by the degree of the penetration of the Third World by the culture of the West. When these “made in the West” products filter down to the level of the ordinary men and women and young people, they cause much confusion, distress and alienation. It is no longer true that the citizens of the Western countries are the only ones who complain of ennui and are haunted to angst; the citizen of the global village suffers also from boredom and anguish, regardless of the exact place of his domicile. Mass communication has spread the pleasures and pains of our civilization everywhere.

Our world needs urgently to hear a distinctively Christian communication of the fundamental facts about God, man and the universe. Who will do this job? The VOA, the BBC, Deutsche Welle, Radio Nederland or Radio Moscow? Neither the Marxist world nor the secularized Western world has the message which is sorely needed by the billions of our world. Christians alone can do the job, by the grace of God.

4. The Goal: God's glory and man's welfare, the “why” of communication

The world is waiting for our communication. Millions of people, especially those under 25, hope that something better will happen to them during their life. The need is great, and yet, Christians seem to be slow in the field of responsible, comprehensive use of mass communications. The field is both complicated and costly. Why bother, why not forget the world over there and simply use communications for our entertainment and for our religious and

cultural needs in North America? Are we responsible for the masses of the Communist and third world nations?

Such questions cannot be asked seriously by Christians. A Christian is, by definition, a person who has experienced God's redemption. A Christian is a new creature; he has undergone an experience called in the Bible: METANOIA, a change of mind. He cannot forget that his existence has meaning only as he seeks God's glory and the welfare of his fellow human beings.

In the previous point, I referred to the facts about God, man and the universe which must be spread or communicated to our world. But these cannot be communicated in a detached or abstract way. There is something very urgent about the Christian communication. It is redemptive in character. This makes it unique. The core of the Christian message is the Good News. The glory of God is reflected brilliantly in the central fact of God's communication: the mission of his son, the Messiah who came to this world seeking to save the lost.

But important as salvation is, the purpose of man is to glorify God in all the areas or spheres of life. A Reformed concept of communication is therefore total, almost encyclopedic. Practically speaking, a Reformed weekly magazine or a Reformed radio or television station cannot be simply evangelistic. The Evangel must always remain at its center. But a Reformed medium of communications deals with subjects and topics which have to do with all areas of life. It spreads, expounds and defends a Christian worldview. To conceive of its mission in a narrow and limited way is to unlawfully abbreviate the total Biblical revelation.

5. The techniques and technology: the "how" of communication

The use of the term communication or communications is rather modern. Unfortunately, it may give the idea that the medium used is far more important than the message "diffused." It may also give the impression that real communication is rather easy thanks to all the modern means of mass communications. But we should not lose our historical perspective. We, twentieth century people are not the first to communicate. This activity has been taking place since the dawn of history. Just think of all the great cultural treasures left for us by the ancient civilizations and which are often brought to light through the work of archeologists. Ponder also the great role of the press during the last 500 years when a great leap forward was accomplished in the field of mass communications.

Of course, it was not until the advent of radio and specifically the transistor revolution that it has become possible to link the whole world with a network of transmitters and receivers. We must never forget in this instance that whereas the invention of the press brought into being an elite of readers, radio has come to the help of millions who have never been blessed with the opportunity to join the literary elite. Anyone who can afford a \$5.00 transistor radio joins the world club of informed and educated citizens!

I want to end my paper by pointing to a neglected aspect of Biblical teaching as the subject of communications is discussed among Christians.

6. The indispensable role of the Holy Spirit: the neglected "how" of communication

I am extremely disturbed today by what I would like to call an uncritical assimilation of secular, cultural anthropology in the field of communication, and especially in cross-cultural communication. I do not want to be understood at all as if I am against benefiting from the just mentioned discipline. But I am amazed, puzzled and chagrined by the fact that many Christian communicators make use of certain theories from what I would call “unbaptized” disciplines forgetting the Biblical and theological givens of the Christian tradition.

Let me explain. It is claimed in certain circles today that many of the attempts of communicating the Gospel overseas have failed because the communicators did not approach their task according to sound theories of cross-cultural communications. I almost get the impression that given the right words and methods, some will guarantee “success” in missions among people of different customs and cultures! But we citizens of the closing years of our century should not take ourselves or theories too seriously. Even though pioneer missionaries in the Middle East for example never used the term “cross cultural communication”, they certainly transmitted the Christian faith and its worldview in the early years of the 19th century to people from another culture. Mistakes were made, yes, but no one should speak about failures as if God’s work is ultimately totally dependant on us.

Of course, communicating the Christian faith and its worldview to people of other cultures is not easy. Language is much more than etymology. Language is a package deal, it includes anthropology, psychology, culture and history. We must do our best and be totally prepared as we seek to communicate the faith to a dying world. When all is said and done however, there can be no RECEPTION of the Christian message, in other words no real communications occurs, without the vital and essential work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit of God who causes communication to be grasped, inwardly digested and to flourish in all the parts of the human personality. The more I read the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, the more I feel convicted by this extremely important truth of the indispensable ministry of the Holy Spirit in the area of communication.

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him’

but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught

by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment:

‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’

But we have the mind of Christ.

I Cor. 2: 6-16 (NIV)

May we, as we establish and launch the Association for Reformed Communications be firmly grounded in God's truth seeking to promote the cause of communications in a thoroughly Christian way. This cause will not fail, not because we are so strong in ourselves, but because of the power of God and the ever present ministry of the Holy Spirit who makes the communication of the Christian message and its implications for all of life effective and fruitful in the lives of all those he sovereignly enlightens and regenerates. Soli Deo Gloria, to God alone the glory!

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