

COMMUNICATION

A Thought

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Introduction

Communication sits at the centre of the Church's calling and for this reason the calling of the ecumenical movement as a whole. Its literal meaning according to Pauline Webb is "*bound together in one.*" It refers to the bond that is forged when information is imparted, when ideas and thoughts are exchanged, when cultures are shared and when people and places normally treated as separate entities are brought into close relationship with one another.

Communication lies at the heart of the Churches' commission to make known the message of the gospel and supremely describes that act of sharing together in the gifts of grace when Christians *communicate* in the holy sacrament.

Says Dutch theologian, Johannes de Graaf, "I would call communication the fundamental human fact, because communication is the essential divine fact. The nature of the Triune God is the communication of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in that holy *perichoresis* of love, out of which results the creation and in which the creation rests."

Communication is the very 'fabric of life.' The business of the world is carried on through communication. Without it society ceases to function. According to Albert van den Heuval,

"Communication is the art of coding and decoding messages between persons and groups by which a common understanding of the meaning of these messages affords a relationship between those who sent and those who received them."ⁱ

In other words communication consists of **information** gathered, plus **understanding**, plus **relations**. The Church as a Christian community is a process of communication between those who lead and those who come under their leadership. Its working-definition as given above becomes demandingly real and crucial in a region like the Pacific where there are multiplicity of contexts that find expressions at different levels. Churches in the region should continually ensure that people or members of a particular group especially those who have been marginalized in one way or another are made aware of what is happening or about to happen inside as well as outside the church. Such information should always, as much as this is possible be communicated effectively and readily understood by those who receive it. Communication is a give and take process and is amicable to good and healthy relationship within the group or community. The ultimate aim of every form of human communication is to create and sustain community and community-life.

Right

There is an element of 'right' in all of this that I want to briefly address. *Right* presupposes *freedom*. Hence freedom of the Press, freedom of religion, right of speech for every citizen and so on and so forth. It holds a fundamental notion of what democracy is all about. We talk so much about *rights* these days – women's rights, human rights, rights of indigenous people and so on and so forth. I have nothing against this language of rights but I believe it is important to move beyond this point and talk about our common humanity or better still our household of life.

Right is for *ruling*. Humanity is for *sharing* in community. Right is a language for combat. For this reason, it carries heavy military tone. It may be a fitting word in situations where unfettered injustice prevails. But in an already hostile world we now live in, we need an embracing word such as *humanity* in our common household of life. We must look for an embracing word that will lead us neither into selfish individualism nor into blind collectivism but to community. This community and community-life finds its root-metaphor in the holy Trinity. Trinity means communion, participation in one and the same life. It also means diversity, distinction, not to say separation. It is a model of justice which demonstrates the diversity and equality of the three persons in the holy Trinity.

The human community is called to act on the analogy of this Trinitarian life and thus to realize justice, acknowledging the diversity and equality of all people. Confessing the diversity of the persons of the Trinity enables us to also make distinctions in the world and yet to maintain its unity. This community must include not only human beings but other creatures as well – our common biodiversity if you like. The very term 'right' easily engenders exclusivism and individualism.

Power of God

The Bible is clear in its affirmation that all power belong to God who is himself Power (Matt. 26: 64). God shares his power with humanity and with the created order. He gives us the freedom to choose how we will exercise that power in the service of our neighbour and the care of the earth. Our choice to abuse power or exercise it irresponsibly results in our becoming the slave of the forces we were created to command.

God is not the static maintainer of a naturalistic balance in seasons, situations and institutions but the God who moves with his people to a new and surprising future. The name 'Yahweh' does not mean: 'I am' in the sense of 'I am the ground of all being' but 'I am with you and I shall be with you'; not essence, but presence; not existence but co-existence – or, better, pre-existence. So he acts with his people in history, he leaves his traces in history.

God's acts are mighty in that they make manifest the presence of a unique active-holy-love in this world. They can only be discerned by eyes of faith. They can remain hidden in the form of God's judgments upon his disobedient Church, and last but not least, God's acts are ambiguous, often hidden in lowliness and weakness. ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong"*** (2 Cor. 12: 8-10). ***"My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power"*** (1 Cor. 2: 4).

Economic, political and military powers use persuasion, coercion and violence to achieve their ends. The Church or Christian community must be moulded, energized and sustained not by the love of power but by the power of love.

Language

Language is arguably the most fragile vessel that hold together and in a significant manner communicate a particular culture. More than this, language defines the identity of a people. Loss of language is also the loss of a people's identity. Control of television and information technology by the English language in Fiji and generally the Pacific is a clear indication that our language is taken by some as incapable to communicate effectively and therefore an inferior medium of communication. This may partly explain the reason(s) why there is much fascination for things that come from abroad. For this reason our people want to migrate to other countries. In many of these new places a fair percentage of especially the younger generation have either lost their language altogether or take little interest in them. For this, the late Professor Hauofa believes that:

"There already exists in the South Pacific a regional economy upon which has emerged a South Pacific society, the privileged group of which share a single dominant culture, with increasingly marginalized sub-cultures shared by the poorer classes."ⁱⁱ

The ruling class of this dominant culture has increasingly become culturally homogenous, sharing a common language which is English, the language of trade, education, information and the judiciary. Proponents of this dominant culture are the educated elites within and among societies in the region and they share common interests with business and ideological partners within and around the region.

Gospel

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin offers a statement about what the Gospel is:

“The announcement that in the series of events that have their centre in the life, ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ something has happened that alters the total human situation and must therefore call into question every human culture.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The gospel is Word. But more than this it is Word in action. It is an event, a happening which finds its centre and dynamism in the person of Christ Jesus. It is an announcement, a proclamation, a communication. Communication which calls itself Christian has one clear message – Jesus the Christ of God. He is the revealed Reality, not to say revealed morality. Not any reality but reality as it ought to be in God who in the words of Professor James Torrance:

“Christ assumed and sanctified our full humanity, offered it to God without spot and wrinkle and gave it back to us.”^{iv}

It is this gift of humanity in Christ that forms the content of the message in Christian communication. The communication of this message is not necessarily the property of the Church nor is it the prerogative of Christians. It is God who communicates and he chooses ways this is carried out in the world and the time for its execution. Consequently, we communicate because God has already communicated with us through his Son Jesus Christ. Christian communication therefore is a response to God’s communication with the world.

Christians need not compete with the others or among themselves. Our role as Christians can be a complementary role. We can work with people of different faiths or of no faith in areas where we face common challenges and problems such as ‘climate change’ and ecological crisis in general. Part of our calling as Christians is to be able to discern what God is always doing in society ‘making and keeping human life human.’ *“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field”* (Matthew 9: 37).

Culture as Context for Communication

Every form of communication including Christian communication is culturally conditioned. It cannot claim a neutral position, unconnected to the culture of the place and people from whence it came. By culture I am referring to:

“that which holds a community together, giving a framework of meaning. It is preserved in language, thought patterns, ways of life, attitudes, symbols and presuppositions. And is celebrated in art, music, drama, literature and the like. It constitutes the collective memory of the people and the collective heritage which will be handed down to generations still to me.”^v

The relation between gospel and culture takes on an important place in the work of churches in the ecumenical movement world-wide. This has come about for the following reasons:

1. We now have a deeper understanding of the meaning and function of culture and how it works in each society.
2. We also recognize how the gospel and culture interact with each other in any context.
3. We are coming to a clearer realization of the problems that have been caused by ignoring or denigrating the receptor cultures during the Western missionary era that often went hand-in-gloves with Western expansion.

What we the Pacific people received in the first place and continue to receive today from outside the region through different religious persuasions is not all real gospel. A lot of this are cultural wrappings of those who brought this gospel to our shores. In its communication the church should be aware of this. On the other hand, this is not new and must not surprise us. God came to us through human form in the person of his Son who was a Jew. Bishop Newbigin writes:

“Neither at the beginning nor at any subsequent time is there or can there be a gospel that is not embodied in culturally conditioned form of words. The idea that one can or could at any time separate out by some process of distillation a pure gospel unadulterated by any cultural accretions is an illusion. It is in fact an abandonment of the gospel, for the gospel is about the Word made flesh. Every statement of the gospel in words is conditioned by the culture of which those words are a part and every style of life that claims to embody the truth of the gospel is a culturally conditioned style of life.”^{vi}

The coming of Christianity into the Pacific was also among other things the introduction of a written culture into an oral culture. Local alphabet had to be worked out and the bible translated and printed. It was through this process, in the case of Fiji for example that the Bauan dialect became the national language or *lingua franca*. This also assisted Bau to receive and enjoy respect among leading chiefdoms in Fiji. It also helped to provide the much needed unity among the indigenous race.

The introduction of the gospel and Western civilization through the help of writing and printing made great inroads into the life of our people. It significantly altered their value system, attitude, their relation to their land and among themselves. Land ownership for example was subsequently codified legally and any disputes regarding this had to be referred to legal authorities. The White settlers made full use of their written culture to great advantage. These words of the Fiji Times, 29th July 1871 reflect the spirit of the time:

“In all respects the European will rule. The power of education and civilization must come to the front and if the prominent figure to be a native, it is only a puppet, the strings of which are pulled by a White man.”

This 19th century spirit of superiority syndrome is with us still up until today but in more subtle ways. It is the spirit to rule, to exploit, to conquer, to win and to apply pressure on others wherever this is advantageous. We should be careful not to apply it among ourselves.

It is ostensibly called in some circles as the spirit of modernism, even post-modernism. Suliana Siwatibau^{vii} sees three broad areas of change occurring in the Pacific:

1. The socio-economic changes that are transforming our communal societies into individualistic ones inextricably drawn into the network of the capitalistic world.
2. The evolution of our cultures into new forms with the introduction of new beliefs, new ideas, and new value systems.
3. The growing militarization of our region with accompanying subtle political domination by those who wield the military power.

All these changes are creating new demands and aspirations in our Pacific communities, the smallest viable socio-economic unit of which is the *koro* or village. These areas of change inevitably create a gap between our community life that we are familiar with and hold dear, and the reality of modernization brought about by Western mode of politics, education and technology. The question now is: How does one enjoy life and live responsibly well within this gap? Christian communication should help us make a well informed choice in making decisions in this new situation. For what Christian communication has to provide is the presence and loving action of God in the midst of the world's conflicts to bring about well-being or wholeness of life.

One Final Word

I said earlier on that what we must communicate is not a 'morality' but a reality. A revealed *Reality*, not an ideology. Not a set of rules but the personal reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Christian communication must seek to see that people make their own choices and decisions on crucial matters that affect their lives in one way or another. Not the '*medium is the message*' as some communication experts would have us believe but the *reality* of Jesus the Christ of God.

This means that understanding and respect for the people and their culture cannot and should not be ignored. Transmission of information must be sensitive to local cultures to ensure that the information now transmitted is clear and understood and in turn may lead on to the cultivation of good and healthy relationship in a given community. Customary ways of communication has a definite place in community-building.

Having said all that, it should also be pointed out that culture and cultural wrappings of the Christian gospel should be allowed to be judged by the same gospel. It is common knowledge that in places especially like Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, respect for those in authority is more or less the rule rather than the exception. Such respect of the people for those in the upper brackets of society is abused when wielded by those in these brackets to silence the weak and voiceless in the community. This is a cheap interpretation of our customary way to prevent the poor and marginalized from seeking to expose the root causes of their misery and from fighting and struggling for their own liberation. Such communication is to be discouraged and challenged.

The main thrust of what I have been saying so far is that communication, Christian communication in particular is a call to community and community-building. We now live in a deeply divided world. Divided at and on many fronts. We are divided among ourselves. And we extend this divisive attitude to the rest of our common household of life. We exploit the world of nature – land, sea and forest and the different species in them. And there is no question that our deeply troubled humanity is seeking light wherever this may be found.

For this reason we look for a kind and style of Christian communication that arms itself with truth, love and justice. There can be no love without justice. Love without justice is sentimentality. On the other hand, the demand for justice without love can be violent. If love without justice is sentimentality, justice without love can be an instrument of evil. God is calling us all to live out these three anatomies of freedom in our communication one with another at this point in time.

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ⁱ "The Conversation of Truths: Communication in the Ecumenical Movement." In *Christian Action in the Asian Struggles*. Singapore: Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), 1973.

ⁱⁱ "The New South Pacific Society: Integration and Independence." In *Class and Culture in the South Pacific*. Edited by Antony Hooper et. al. Auckland: Centre of Pacific Studies, University of Auckland. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific (USP), 1987, p. 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. Geneva: World council of churches (WCC), 1986. p. 3.

^{iv} In an unpublished paper.

^v *Gathered for Life. Official Report of the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC)*. Vancouver: 1983, p. 32.

^{vi} Newbiggin op. Cit. p. 4.

^{vii} The 1983 Graduation Address for the Pacific Theological College (PTC) given at Suva Grammar School Hall.