

Mission IS Communication

When we try to understand a place or a country, we can learn it by walking the valleys, climbing the hills, noting (and remembering!) everything we see, feel, and hear. After a year, or ten, or a lifetime we have at least a superficial understanding of a relatively small area. In that area, we are specialists! What is beyond the next hill, we don't know and we just leave that to someone else.

Scenes of Oregon

These are a few of the nearly 200 photos I took in June 2004 as my brother and I were re-visiting places where we had spent time when we were growing up. How do I explain it? How can I find my way back, or to a place I have not been?

A map will do it, a map of some kind. Map

But even maps only tell part of the story; they are useful if they fit with our purpose. There are road maps, rainfall maps, geological maps, population maps.

A map is a kind of theory - an organization of known facts, enabling us to find our way, to predict what might happen, to understand what is happening.

Mission work is like a series of photos - some are great, some are best ignored, some are interesting and even moving. But individual photos do little to tell us how to improve, how to approach new challenges, or to understand where and why we did not achieve according to our expectations.

I suggest a **theory of mission**. Rather than giving you a series of experiences and glimpses of both success and failure, I want to suggest a **framework** within which you can continue to grow - and not just take away a few soon-to-be forgotten "tricks of the trade," a few stories that momentarily move us.

In mission, we are not just a collection of parts where each of us have our specialty and bias that is the center of our mental and work universe.

A coherent view of mission could help us to be biblical at a deeper, fuller level than we usually experience. I Corinthians 12 could be a joy, rather than an explanation of our conflicts.

But how can something so huge, so diverse, be seen as a unified theory? That is not impossible. Consider the simplicity of Einstein's famous theory - it encompasses not merely the world, but the universe. $E=mc^2$.

Is there anything in mission (or any ministry) that is not communication?

Remember that transmission is not real communication, that genuine communication is always

participatory. Anything else is merely sending words and actions spinning into a non-virtual unreality.

I suggest that an adequate framework for mission is built around communication, and our human part of doing mission is to create understanding of God.

This framework for mission is much more than ways to improve your output of words and extend their range, or to gain consent from an alien audience, or to increase the number and diversity of those who are in churches. There is great richness of meaning in the word "communication," and the concept, more than usually understood

*Communication - community - communion ==
derived from comun, having in common*

Where does communication begin?

Communication begins within the Godhead, where there is the only perfect communication. We find a glimpse of it in Genesis 1:26, "Let **us** make man in **our** image, in **our** likeness.

God desires that we should enter into that communion, that perfect communication, union with Him. John 17:20-21 summarizes His desire for man, "*I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 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 so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*"

To bring that about, **God communicates**. He is a communicating God. God communicates through the creation; He created by communicating, in fact. "God said... and it was." As man could hear, He spoke. "*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways...*" (Hebrews 1:1) He Job 33:14-19 explicitly states that it is God's nature to communicate, "*For God does speak - now one way, now another - though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, He may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword... Or a man may be chastened on a bed of pain.*"

1 Kings 8:56-59. "*Praise be to the Lord, who has given rest to His people Israel just as He promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises He gave through His servant Moses. May the Lord our God be with us as He was with our fathers; may He never leave us nor forsake us. May He turn our hearts to Him, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commands, decrees and regulations He gave our fathers. And may these words of mine, which I have prayed before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night.*"

One clear statement that Jehovah is a creating and communicating God is in Zechariah 12:1, "*This is the word of the Lord concerning Israel. The Lord who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him...*"

Matthew 29:18-20 is often used as the summary of the task Christ has given the Church. In its

essence, **the task is to communicate knowledge of Him** - to make disciples, to baptize, to teach. Each is a series of communicative action. This is reiterated in John 20:21, "*As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*" And in John 17:18, "*As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*" How was He sent? He, the Word, was sent to live with the people and to speak and teach the works and commands of God.

And the task of communication is given to us, "*We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*" Colossians 1:28-29.

Mission is communication. We can build an adequate theory of mission through full understanding of communication. I suggest it is **Integrated Christian Communication**. It begins in the very nature of God, uses the structures of human society to give knowledge of Him, and uses man's tools for creating understanding of God's revelation. Integrated Christian Communication provides a biblical, comprehensive and functional pattern for the central task of the Church - mission.

The Bible is the story of His communication with man, who sometimes listened, more frequently did not; who sometimes obeyed when he heard, but usually not. Supremely, God **spoke in Christ, the Word**. And motivated by His Holy Spirit, we seek to extend that communication to everyman. **THAT IS MISSION.**

How best can we communicate the fulness of His grace and love? Are there guidelines fundamental to the telling, sharing, communicating - regardless of where we are, who we are, and the devices we use to get people's attention?

Yes. I suggest eighteen summary statements (better called propositions, I believe) that give a foundation for creating understanding of God, of man, between man and man, and between man and God. They are illustrated in Scriptures and most clearly in the life of Christ, who is God with us.

The fundamental of all communication is Proposition 1 - **Communication is involvement**. We do not know God by learning about God, but only by being involved with Him. First the accumulation of guilt, disobedient stopping of our ears, wilful acts of rebellion - all of the shattered debris of our lives must be cleaned out. A new nature that would not hide from God, but enjoy His presence, must be implanted.

We "receive" Him; or believe in Him; or "accept" Him. Whatever term used, however we describe the action, Jesus finds a place in our heart and gives us new life. We are given a new nature so that we can become fit for the kingdom of God, to enter into full communion/communication with the Trinity. We are involved with Him, and grow in Him - until we reach full stature of maturity. The Christian life is based on involvement with God.

Also, **communication is a process**. Our involvement with God continues, steadily permeating every part of our mind and will, expressed through the body. We were saved. We are being saved. We will be saved. We joy in His continuing work in us, and look forward to the finish of that work - the consummation of all things, and the establishing of full and permanent communion with Him forever and ever.

God speaks in many ways, without forcing us to listen or even to force us to make the effort to understand what He is saying. Even His communication is incomplete unless men listen, unless they discern His voice in the numbing rumble of life. Some say that God is silent. Others say he is indifferent. And of course, there are those who say He does not exist - because they have not heard Him. (The Russian astronaut who went up in Sputnik. When he returned, He proclaimed that there was no God. "When I was up in heaven, I looked for Him and I did not see Him.") It did not seem to occur to Him that He could not hear or see everything. **Communication is what is heard, not only what is said**. And a sub-point expands the significance of that proposition, **Meaning is individual and internal**. In other words, God speaks to each of us, sometimes directly, sometimes through our community.

But who can penetrate the mind and heart of another? Even the closest of friends, the closest of marriage partners, fail to fully comprehend the other's understanding and desires. God has extended himself to us, He enters into those who desire Him, to enable understanding of His heart. **Spiritual perception and response is the work of God's Spirit**, summarizes proposition four.

These first four propositions are clustered together showing how we can know God.
- involvement, process, hearing and speaking, taught by the Spirit. The next two speak of the Message we are given, and that we extend to every part of the world. God's purpose was established before the beginnings of the world, and is unchanging to the end of the ages. God has an objective, a goal, and we are given the ability to join Him in achieving that goal or purpose. Proposition 6. To adequately enter into that purpose, we of course need to master the content that we share. Proposition 5.

Foundation, Framework, and Function- A Pattern for Mission

While the 18 propositions show another view of how we know God, how we grow in Him, and His purposes, they also show us a pattern to follow in mission. Our purpose in mission is not to manipulate people to agree with our teaching, but to create clear understanding of God's Message to man. That can never happen unless we are truly involved with the people with whom we are sharing the Message. So proposition 1 is fundamental in our missionary strategies.

Each proposition includes both the Divine dimension and the human dimension, i.e., communication from and with God, and communication between man and man. Three dimensions of communication can be seen, what I call foundation, framework, and function. Each dimension is present in varying degrees in each proposition.

God indeed communicates at the functional level, and within the framework of human systems. But

all of it emanates from foundational communication within the Trinity, and man's communion with Him. John Taylor sums it up well "How secondary, indeed how futile, are all the means of communication unless they are born out of the very truth they are meant to convey."¹

But seldom have we concentrated on learning how to do our basic task - communication - to create understanding of Jesus Christ.

Theology is essential. It is the content of the message, expressed in an appropriate way for each culture. But it does not tell us how to effectively share that content with other people.

Anthropology is also needed. It helps us to learn the patterns of living that people follow, and to understand their ways of thinking. But it describes people without guiding us into how we actually communicate with them... that is, create understanding of the Message of Christ.

Things like community development and public health are necessary to work out Christ's compassion and bring redemption to the community as well as the individual. However, showing compassion does not by itself give understanding of Jesus.

How do we communicate the very life of Jesus to those who do not know Him? What guidelines can help us when we enter a new place, people or community with the Good News? How do we build a design for ministry that works with the way people are, rather than the way we are? Because our Lord is the Creator, we know that He made man and knows perfectly how man functions physically, socially, and mentally. In learning communication, we learn how to reach man as God has made Him.

Communication is central in ministry - both in our experiencing of God and in the experience of ministry. Using anything else as the grid by which we shape or evaluate what we are doing, sidesteps the centrality of the trust given to us in the Gospel - to proclaim Jesus to all peoples.

Indeed there must be holiness of life, but not as bribe so that God will bless our plans and efforts. It is essential for the basic communication with Him out of which all ministry flows.

Certainly we should know where the unreached live and create strategies by which all can be brought into His light. But if these efforts are not rooted in rich communion with Him, they degenerate into ideological triumphalism rather than extending to all the joy and liberty of new life in Christ.

Yes, churches ought to grow, but measuring ministry by growth tends to a pragmatism that favors attractive programs over the challenge of disciple-making.

Considering communication as a set of methods and techniques shifts the focus to the preacher, the singer, the worship team. The performance is evaluated rather than the relationship established with

God. Worship does not exist without communication, but the communication must be at the foundational level, rather than only at the functional level, a form of words and music. *God is Spirit, and His worshipers must worship in Spirit and in truth.*

Our instruction, our joy, is to proclaim the Good News, to make disciples, to teach, in other words to make known the message given by God. The essential missionary task is not to learn culture, analyze societies, identify needs, or to set up training programs, but to create understanding of God's self-revelation. For this, communication is central.²