

Monday, May 15, 2006

Christian Communication: Interpersonal Communication from a Biblical Perspective

Introduction

Interpersonal communications is a topic that applies to many aspects of our lives. Any time we interact with other individuals, we use interpersonal communication skills. Interpersonal communication occurs all the time, yet many people are completely unaware of how to relate to themselves and others. Misunderstanding, turmoil, and conflict mark their lives. Few people realize the individuality and worth of other individuals, people made in the image of Christ. Sadly, many Christians have difficulty communicating with others because they have not first established good communication with God. One cannot expect to be able to communicate well with others if he cannot first communicate well with God.

A Summary of Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication occurs any time there is face-to-face communication between two or more people in the same immediate vicinity. The topic of interpersonal communications contains aspects such as listening, empathy, expressing oneself, conflict, relationships, and perception. Interpersonal communication is a very complex topic; much time has been spent by social experts analyzing the inner workings of communication to determine how and why people interact the way they do. Donnell King, a faculty member at Pellissippi State Technical Community College in Knoxville, Tennessee, wrote the following about interpersonal communication: "No form of communication is simple. Because of the number of variables involved, even simple requests are extremely complex. Theorists note that whenever we communicate there are really at least six "people" involved: 1) who you think you are; 2) who you think the other person is; 3) who you think the other person thinks you are; 4) who the other person thinks s/he is; 5) who the other person thinks you are; and 6) who the other person thinks you think s/he is" (King). This is why misunderstandings occur so often between individuals. Although both parties may have had the best of intentions, errors in perception and interpretation can result in an entirely different message being decoded from what the communicator intended to say. The study of interpersonal communications involves understanding how people interact with each other and learning to communicate in an effective manner.

Acquiring the Proper Worldview

Interpersonal communications is an important topic for each person to study in order to learn more about communication and how to improve communication skills. Unfortunately, most textbooks present interpersonal communications from a secular, humanistic worldview. A proper understanding of communications must begin with an understanding of the One who created communications--God, the creator of all things. It is only when we see God as the source of communications and when we see communications from a Biblical perspective that we truly understand the significance of the intricacies of communication.

Humans Are Made in the Image of Christ

In order to see communications from a Christian perspective, we need look no farther than the revealed Word of God to mankind, the Holy Bible. In Genesis 1:26, we read: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Gen. 1:26) From this verse, we see that the human race was created in the image of God. In his book *The Trauma of Transparency*, author J. Grant Howard wrote, "God is a personal being with the capacity to communicate. He created man in His image. Man, therefore, is a personal being with the same capacity to communicate. Like his Creator he can think, feel and decide... Nothing else in God's creation, even though it be alive, has this kind of personhood. Only man is a person and can engage in the communication process with his Creator" (15-16).

Clear Communication with Christ Comes First

Drawing from the conclusion made by Howard, one can infer that prayer, the act of communicating with God, is an activity involving interpersonal communication. Therefore, any study of interpersonal communication from a Christian worldview should start with a look at prayer and how one communicates with God.

Most interpersonal communications classes begin with a study on the communications model: sender-message-channel-listener-feedback-interference-situation. According to Howard, God and man communicate according to this process, too. Howard writes: "God is the source--the sender. He encodes and transmits the message. That message has been sovereignly preserved for us in the Bible. Man received and decodes the message. The process of receiving and decoding involves feedback, wherein man verbalizes what he hears and understands--to himself, to others, and to God" (85-86).

Learning more about interpersonal communications helps us to understand how we communicate with God and how to improve our communication with Him. We are better equipped to listen to Him if we know more about how He speaks to us. (Howard, 86)

God commands us to "Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech" (Is. 28:23). Just as in communication with other human beings, the first step toward better communication with God is to listen to Him. All too often when we pray we are quick to speak and eager to see things from our own perspectives. We need to stop and silently listen for His voice, seeking what He has to say. When we read His Word, we often interpret it through our paradigms and decode it from our perspective. We must develop empathic listening in order to see God's Word from God's perspective. We must strive to know Him better so that we can see life from God's perspective. One of the best ways to get to know someone better is to listen to him. We have to be able to listen well in order to know someone well. Listening is an active activity, not a passive activity. Listening involves an active focus on the other person, mental awareness to process and understand what the other person is saying, and involvement in any discussion points or questions that arise (Landsberger). The apostle James instructs us to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22-25). True listening involves more than just hearing what the other person says; it involves understanding the other person and acting upon what is said.

In order to be a good listener, we have to put distractions aside. In the study of interpersonal communication, this is known as "not constructing roadblocks." When we communicate with God, often things come up as roadblocks that get in the way of clear, uninhibited communication with Him. David McCasland, writing in the devotional magazine *Our Daily Bread*, wrote the following: "Undisturbed stillness has become more elusive and therefore more necessary than ever to seek... A quiet place helps us to listen to Him. Away from voice-mail and e-mail, we turn from our daily schedule to His eternal plan" (McCasland). It is our human nature to allow thoughts and daydreams to distract us from listening to God's voice. We need to overcome these distractions and fixate on Christ, eagerly listening for what He has to say.

The great 20th-century preacher, A.W. Tozer, said this about God and communication: "I think it may be accepted as axiomatic that God is constantly trying to speak with men. He desires to communicate Himself, to impart holy ideas to those of His creatures capable of receiving them. This divine impulse toward self-expression may account for the creation, particularly for God's having been made intelligent and moral beings who could hear and understand truth. Among these beings man stands at the top, having been created in the image of God and so possessing purer and finer organs for the apprehension of whatever can be known of God" (Tozer, *God Tells the Man Who Cares* 12-13)

Man was created for fellowship—sanctified interpersonal communication—with God. God desires that we have an even more intimate relationship with Him than we have with close friends and immediate family members. He desires that we communicate with Him in a way that He can impart His holiness to us and conform us to be more like Him. Yet, we often perceive Him as being far-off and uninterested in our daily lives. Nothing could be farther from the truth! The God who created us desires to have total intimate fellowship with us.

Relationships With Others

Our relationships with others are typically a good representation of our relationship with God. If we are walking closely with Him, our close walk will be reflected through our personal conduct in our interactions with others. When we see other people as God sees them, we will see wonderful, special, unique creations. The concept of uniqueness and how it relates to interpersonal communication was discussed in great detail by Martin Buber in his book *Ich Und Du*, or, in English, *I And Thou*. Buber stated that uniqueness (versus interchangeability) is one of the five things that set human beings apart from other creations (Fox). It is important to realize that each person is a unique creation—not another object from the same mold. Understanding how each person is a special creation made in God's own image is a solid foundation for seeing others for who they really are—which is one of the basic tenets of interpersonal communications. Second, in perspective of a Christian worldview, we ought to be aware of our communication and ensure that it is pleasing to God. A Christian's communication ought to be marked by soundness of speech, moral purity, and truthfulness (Phil. 4:8). Christians ought to always honor God by displaying high moral character when speaking and communicating (Eph. 4:29).

Practical Application of Communication Techniques to Daily Life

A Christian Perspective on Business Communication

Honest communication is something that is often missing from modern business communication. Modern business has been characterized as being interested only in financial gain and personal advancement. All around us, we see lying taking place so often that people are deadened to the effects of lying. A level of distrust is now commonplace in relationships, as it is very difficult to determine when communication is honest and straightforward or when communication is deceitful. A Christian communicator should never turn to deceit. "Truth is sincerity; and in all we say and do, we must be sincere. We must not make false impressions, directly or indirectly" (Barton, 1). The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines deceit as "the action or practice of deceiving someone by concealing or misrepresenting the truth" ("deceit"). Any time the truth is misrepresented, even in nonverbal communication, it is deceit and it is wrong. Christian business communicators ought to be known for their honest dealings, straightforward reports, and visible demonstration of character. A Christian business communicator should live above reproach, never being a target for accusations of fraud. In our present society, there have been many professing Christian businessmen who have seen their careers ruined by accusations of financial fraud or deceptive practices. It may seem profitable to act deceptively while not practicing outright lies, but ultimately those who have lied for gain will be found out. Honesty is more than just an outward expression of truthfulness; it is ultimately a heart attitude. "It is far better to be perfectly honest, for then our consciences will be at rest: we can meet every one without misgiving or fear, and whatever we have, we can enjoy -- feeling it is entirely our own" (Barton, 23).

A Christian Perspective on Empathic Communication

Empathic communication involves seeing life from a new paradigm -- the other person's perspective. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey sums up the topic of empathic communication this way: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (Leadership U, Habit Five). By seeking first to understand, one will begin to see things from the other person's perspective, looking out at the world the same way as he or she sees it. Empathic communication is powerful because it provides much more accurate information about the other person. You really know what is going on inside another person, rather than the "assumed" feelings you come up with based on your own paradigms.

Empathic communication requires a level of openness that is rare in modern communication. Few people are willing to expose their inner feelings enough to let another person inside them. Perhaps this is a result of a gradual decline in sincere Christian love in our society. In his book *Becoming a Whole Person in a Broken World*, Ron Lee Davis wrote: "To be truly involved in the lives of our fellow Christians as God intended means that we have a special quality of relationship that is rarely found in the world anymore. Such a relationship does not take place merely as we sit in the same sanctuary with other Christians for one hour a week. [It] only takes place as we open our lives to one another... we need a few Christian brothers and sisters who will keep our confidences, who will check on our personal and spiritual growth, and who will open their own lives to us" (178-179).

Empathic communication can be a very powerful way to minister to someone who is in need. A Christian communicator should seek the Holy Spirit for insights into how to understand the other person. The key to empathic communication is trying to understand the other person for who s/he is, without judging or making false conclusions. Empathic communication is a product of good listening skills, strong character, and Christ-like love for others. It involves total selflessness and a strong desire to really get to know someone under the surface. It involves moving beyond one's own flesh to invest in another person.

Christians also ought to use empathic communication when conversing with God. As He works in us to make us more like Him, we should be drawn closer to Him in such a way that we begin to see things from His perspective rather than from our fallen perspective. If we communicate empathically with God, we will be moved from our own flesh and into His character. We will see others as God sees them, not as fallen humans see them. Although it is important for us to communicate empathically with one another, it is of utmost importance that we communicate empathically with God so that we see things from His perspective. Far too often, we make the mistake of interpreting His Word for our lives through our own man-made schemes of interpretation, thus causing part of the message to be lost. We must cast aside our paradigms when we approach God, and instead seek to understand from His perspective. When this occurs, God can teach us and impart wisdom to us in a way that we would not be able to understand if we were filtering it through our own human paradigms.

A Christian Perspective on Self-Concept

Secular culture teaches many different ways for man to "find himself." Philosophers who emphasize the power of reasoning echo the French philosopher Descartes, who said the famous words, "I think, therefore I am" (Kemerling). Victorian philosophers taught, "I am what I will," "I am what I can do," or "I am what I own." Romantic philosophers taught, "I am what I feel." Existentialists teach that man has no essence to discover. Eastern philosophers teach, "I am one with the universe." The humanist says, "Look inside yourself to find your true being" (Keyes, 74-75).

The Christian, however, has no place for these humanistic practices. The Christian should turn to Christ for his identity, because as a Christian one must put aside the old identity and take on Christ's identity. God simply identifies Himself as "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex. 3:14). In his book *Beyond Identity*, Dick Keyes writes, "God is dependent on nothing and on no one for his origin, existence, and meaning. Notice that he does not say "I create, therefore I am," or "I am omnipotent, therefore I am," or even "I am God, therefore I am." He does not need to identify himself with anything external to himself, and He does not need to justify Himself to anyone. He alone can say "I am that I am," a statement of completely self-sufficient, self-contained identity. This makes every human claim to self-sufficiency vain arrogance" (75-76). We are identified with Christ, and we are who we are in Him. Therefore, the topic of self-concept as taught in interpersonal communications must be evaluated in light of a Biblical worldview.

Our view of ourselves also has significant impact on our eternal state. A.W. Tozer wrote, "The man who is seriously convinced that he deserves to go to hell is not likely to go there, while the man who believes that he is worthy of heaven will certainly never enter that blessed place" (Tozer, *Man, The Dwelling Place of God* 15).

The impact of modern positive-thinking teaching and humanistic self-concept thought is damaging to many individuals, causing them to think too highly of themselves. We, in and of ourselves, are as filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6). It is the work of Christ, not anything that we can do on our own, that brings us to perfection. If it were not for Christ's grace and election, there would not be any hope for any of us. Therefore, our self-concept must be fully from God's perspective, not from a fleshly, humanistic view. Drawing from the statement made by Tozer and from various passages of Scripture, it is imperative that Christian communicators understand and practice humility. Pride will only lead to destruction (Prov. 16:18), but God will show favor to the humble (Prov. 3:34).

A Christian Perspective on Conflict Resolution

Conflict occurs all around us. In our fallen state, it is impossible to spend much time around other individuals before conflict arises. However, according to communications experts, conflict may be a good thing because the resolution of the conflict can lead to stronger relationships (Bellafiore).

Interpersonal communications textbooks teach us about the different ways we can respond to conflict, such as by pouncing, placating, computing, distracting, and leveling (Fox). How does God want us to respond to conflict?

We need to not think of ourselves higher than we ought (Romans 12:3). If we have a prideful view of ourselves, we will be prone to pouncing on others and trying to win conflicts by asserting our own superiority. John Calvin wrote, "We are all so blinded and upset by self-love that everyone imagines he has a just right to exalt himself, and to undervalue all others in comparison to self... If the same talents which we admire in ourselves appear in others, or even our betters, we depreciate and diminish them with the utmost malignity, in order that we may not have to acknowledge the superiority of others" (27-28).

We should also seek the good of everyone (Calvin, 33). This relates to the concept of "seeking the greater good" or "seeking the third alternative," terms brought up in interpersonal communications discussions. We need to remember God's standards for communicating with others, as laid out in Paul's Letter to the Church at Ephesus: "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor...Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear...Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:25, 29, 31-32).

God forgave us for the many wrongs we have committed against His holy character. As Christian communicators, we need to be quick to forgive others just as God did, or else we will become like the ungrateful slave, who was forgiven by his master but refused to forgive those under him (Matthew 18:23-35). Conflict resolution, and the associated topics of peace and forgiveness, are not optional aspects of a Christian's life. God repeatedly commands us to live peaceably with others (Rom. 12:18) and to show forgiveness (Matt. 6:14). If we are truly grateful for God's forgiveness of our wrongs, if we are living in a close relationship with God, and if we love others and see them for the unique creations that they are, then we will be able to live at peace with others and forgive them. This is how God would have Christian communicators practice conflict resolution: through humility, peace, and forgiveness.

Summary

A vibrant relationship with God, the Creator and Master Communicator, must be the first priority for any Christian communicator. We were created to communicate, both with God and with our fellow men. We must strive to make sure that our communication glorifies God and builds up others. If our relationship with God is right, then right communication with others will follow. No man can be successful in his communication with other individuals until his relationship with God is strong.

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