

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

CHRISTIANITY AND COMMUNICATION

F. W. DILLISTONE

I

SCIENTISTS assure us that the second Industrial Revolution has begun. The first was brought about by the expanding use of the machine and the multiplication of manufactured goods. Man dedicated his labour to the service of the machine and in return gained possession of increasing numbers of mechanical appliances and manufactured articles. He did not cease to be dependent upon the land and the products of the land: he was not unmindful of the need for improved communications in order that his goods might be advertised and distributed: but the whole drive of his energies was set in the direction of making more efficient machinery and of producing larger quantities of goods.

The twentieth century, however, has witnessed a startling change of emphasis. When the history of this century comes to be viewed in proper perspective it will probably be judged that the most powerful instruments of change in human affairs during this period have been the aeroplane and the radio. Each is essentially an instrument of communication. By means of the aeroplane man can span the continents in hours rather than days or weeks; by means of the radio his voice can be heard around the globe with no delay in transmission. But these two instruments, though at present the most obvious and most dramatic in their effects, do not stand alone. On every side men are bending their energies in the direction of improving still further the means of communication and of conveying 'information' in more efficient and economical ways.

Though it is comparatively easy for the layman to take advantage of the amazing facilities now offered to him by the telephone, the cinema, the radio and television, it is more difficult for him to grasp what is happening in the wider world of communication theory and practice. He may read about electronic 'brains' and automatic factories and guided missiles but these may seem at first sight to be only new examples of the inventive genius of the scientific age. They are new inventions, it is true, but they are more than this. They are expressions of the new direction of technology towards efficiency of communication rather than towards efficiency of production. They are the heralds of the second Industrial Revolution which may change the habits and outlook of men in this age as profoundly as the first affected men in the 18th and 19th centuries. To quote one assessment of the new situation contained in an article designed for the non-expert and

appearing in the London *Times* of December 7th, 1954: "Practically everything depends to some extent upon the efficiency of communications, for information passes along all such systems, electrical, mechanical or human; it flows through the nervous system of the animal body, and in the body social is the vital basis for all activity. . . . Man's advancement and the progress of civilizations have depended on his ability to receive, to communicate and to record his knowledge. With the ever-increasing flow of information, to-day's claim on these facilities—applied to a still wider field—is greater than ever before and efforts to improve and extend them are the goals of scientists and inventors in this country and elsewhere."

II

Have these new developments any importance for the Christian Church? Using a New Testament phrase I would answer: Much every way. They have a direct bearing on the Christian doctrine of man (is he ultimately to be compared to an electronic brain?), on the Christian doctrine of society (can social trends be predicted and pre-directed by means of statistical computations?) and above all on the Christian theory and practice of communication. It has often been pointed out that the spread of early Christianity was due in no small measure to the network of road-communications which had been magnificently engineered by the Roman technicians and to the existence of the Greek *Koine*, providing a means of reaching the minds and imaginations of the common people. Nothing can be of greater concern to the Christian evangelist to-day than to determine what are the most significant instruments for conveying information to our modern world and what are the language-forms which have the widest currency in ordinary speech.

Leaving aside the question of the transmission of more technical information, the great new fact of our time in the field of communication in general is undoubtedly the growing influence and importance of television. In a recent number of the *B.B.C. Quarterly*, Dr. B. Ifor Evans, distinguished man of letters and Provost of University College, London, writes: "Television itself is still in its very infancy. Within ten years, given normal possibilities of development, it will be the major instrument in our cultural life. . . . Television is so brilliant a medium that it must occupy increasingly the leisure of those to whom it is available." In similar vein a noted public figure in England has described television as "probably the most important influence on the human mind since the invention of printing". Already there are signs of revolutionary changes in the techniques of political electioneering and debating as this medium is brought into use, and the worlds of education and commerce are being increasingly affected by it. Quite certainly the Christian Churches cannot afford to neglect the challenge and the potentialities of this most powerful means of communication.

But what is essentially *new* about television? Many of its properties are

appearing in the London *Times* of December 7th, 1954: "Practically everything depends to some extent upon the efficiency of communications, for information passes along all such systems, electrical, mechanical or human; it flows through the nervous system of the animal body, and in the body social is the vital basis for all activity. . . . Man's advancement and the progress of civilizations have depended on his ability to receive, to communicate and to record his knowledge. With the ever-increasing flow of information, to-day's claim on these facilities—applied to a still wider field—is greater than ever before and efforts to improve and extend them are the goals of scientists and inventors in this country and elsewhere."

II

Have these new developments any importance for the Christian Church? Using a New Testament phrase I would answer: Much every way. They have a direct bearing on the Christian doctrine of man (is he ultimately to be compared to an electronic brain?), on the Christian doctrine of society (can social trends be predicted and pre-directed by means of statistical computations?) and above all on the Christian theory and practice of communication. It has often been pointed out that the spread of early Christianity was due in no small measure to the network of road-communications which had been magnificently engineered by the Roman technicians and to the existence of the Greek *Koine*, providing a means of reaching the minds and imaginations of the common people. Nothing can be of greater concern to the Christian evangelist to-day than to determine what are the most significant instruments for conveying information to our modern world and what are the language-forms which have the widest currency in ordinary speech.

Leaving aside the question of the transmission of more technical information, the great new fact of our time in the field of communication in general is undoubtedly the growing influence and importance of television. In a recent number of the *B.B.C. Quarterly*, Dr. B. Ifor Evans, distinguished man of letters and Provost of University College, London, writes: "Television itself is still in its very infancy. Within ten years, given normal possibilities of development, it will be the major instrument in our cultural life. . . . Television is so brilliant a medium that it must occupy increasingly the leisure of those to whom it is available." In similar vein a noted public figure in England has described television as "probably the most important influence on the human mind since the invention of printing". Already there are signs of revolutionary changes in the techniques of political electioneering and debating as this medium is brought into use, and the worlds of education and commerce are being increasingly affected by it. Quite certainly the Christian Churches cannot afford to neglect the challenge and the potentialities of this most powerful means of communication.

But what is essentially *new* about television? Many of its properties are

as it were, through two channels neither of which can ever be independent of the other. One may be described as personal unveiling, the other as dramatic activity: one as disclosure of Eternal Being, the other as initiation of radical change. To emphasize the one at the expense of the other has always led to distortion and ultimately to serious error in the course of Christian history.

But what are some of the deeper characteristics of the two channels to which we have referred? The *Person* of the Son immediately suggests continuity of life, extension of being, maintenance of form. Sonship is not a relationship suddenly acquired or suddenly lost: it belongs to an individual throughout the span of his particular career—indeed it precedes it and continues after it. So the New Testament speaks of the (eternal) Holy Spirit through whose operation the Son of God took human nature upon Himself and expressed His Sonship in human form. By so doing He made it possible for men to *see* the true nature of sonship. Perhaps other senses are also involved but primarily we *see*. "He that hath seen Me (the Son) hath seen the Father." "We beheld . . . the glory as of an only-begotten of the Father." "The life (of the Logos) was manifested and we have *seen*." "The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face—or Person—of Jesus Christ." In short, God has made His communication through a Son in order that we may *see*.

What then may be said of the other channel? The *Work* of the Son immediately suggests change, re-direction, a momentous reversal. A hostile and estranged humanity could not be transformed by any light and easy process. The Son of Man must suffer, must be utterly identified with man in his lost-ness, must die. So the New Testament speaks of the eternal (Holy) Spirit through whom the Son of God offered Himself once for all, dividing all time and every time, changing *in potentia* the whole human situation. *Now* the good news is released that the deed has been done. "We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God." "We are heralds of Christ as though God were appealing through us. We beseech you in Christ's stead: Be ye reconciled to God." In short, it is for all men to *hear* the communication of what God in Christ has done for mankind.

IV

In the light of this sketch of the theological background of Christian communication, it becomes possible to work out certain principles which govern the Church's responsibility in any age. In the first place there must be the continuing disclosure of the Person of the Son before the *eyes* of men. They must be enabled to *see*. It is true that there is a form of inward vision which may not seem to be immediately dependent upon outward perception: it is also true that words can bring vivid pictures to the human imagination. Yet these two forms of seeing can never make the primary form of direct vision unnecessary or redundant. At every period of Christian history, if communication is to be effective, there must be certain great

objectivities related to the Person of the Son of God which people can literally *see*. It need hardly be said that nothing can more effectively disclose Divine sonship than the individual or the community whose pattern of life bears upon it the stamp of the incarnate Christ. A Stephen, a church such as that of Corinth, which could be described as a 'living epistle', brings vividly before men's eyes the pattern of the sonship to which all have been called and to which, by God's grace, all may be conformed.

But man lives not only in the immediacy of the present. By the images which he constructs he constantly seeks to universalize the vision which he has seen. So through painting and sculpture, through architecture and the mystery-drama, he seeks to placard openly before his own eyes and the eyes of his contemporaries the objectivities and stabilities of the pattern of sonship which has been revealed to him. It is significant that the image of the good Shepherd bodied forth this vision before the eyes of the early Christians in days of persecution. Or again, speaking of the mystery-plays of the 15th century, Emile Mâle says: "I should find it difficult to believe that anyone listened with much attention to the metaphysical discourses of Justice and Mercy or to the long sermon preached by John the Baptist. But to see Jesus in person, to see Him live and die and rise from the dead before their very eyes—that was what moved the crowd even to tears." And I myself would be prepared to add that such a film as *The Robe* is doing for our twentieth century what the mystery-play did in the 15th. The media already mentioned go on from age to age, changing in some measure according to the climate and the techniques of a particular period, but all concerned with the task of enabling men to *see* the nature of the sonship which God has revealed to men.

In the second place there must be the ever-renewed proclamation that the supreme event of the ages has happened through Christ. Men must *hear* the good news. Again it is true that there is a form of inward hearing which may not seem to be immediately dependent upon physical sounds: it is also true that the printed page can transmute itself into virtually audible words as it makes its impact upon the perceptive organs. Yet the spoken word shows no signs of becoming obsolete. If Christian communication is to be effective there must, in every age, be the open proclamation that the Christ has changed the whole course of human history and the whole nature of human destiny. Again it need hardly be said that nothing more impressively proclaims this change than the living witness to an actual re-direction from sin to holiness, from self to God, such as have been given by a Saul of Tarsus or a Church of Thessalonica. When men proclaim that as a result of the work of the Christ they have themselves turned from idols to serve a living and true God, others begin to realize the unparalleled proportions of the initiating event.

But there are symbolic extensions of the word as well as of the image. Through *forms* of speech—the lecture, the sermon, the drama, the ballad,

the hymn, the open-air address—the Christian evangelist has sought in different ages to proclaim the news of the great Event to his contemporaries. Each of these forms has its own conventions and techniques and it brings no honour to God to neglect or ignore these necessities of effective communication. For example the acoustics of a particular building may make easy hearing impossible: an oration is quite unsuitable in a lecture-room: a poem may be quite unadaptable to singing: a seventeenth century sermon could not be imitated in its form to-day. Perhaps the most obvious example of changed technique to-day is the radio talk. Anything in the nature of declamation or the flight of oratory or the intense emotional outburst is quite out of place on the radio and is a complete deterrent to effective communication. The radio is the most amazing instrument yet invented for the extension of the human voice so that one man's announcement can be heard by millions. If the technique of the radio talk can be mastered, it seems to be the supreme means offered by the 20th century of enabling men to *hear* the good news of what God has done in Christ.

V

So far we have kept seeing and hearing apart so that the particular relatedness of each might appear more clearly. What finally is to be said, however, of the media of communication which work through eye *and* ear, through the image *and* the word? How great, for example, is the debt of the Reformed Churches to the invention of printing which was revolutionizing the world of communications in Europe in the 16th century! Through this marvellous medium it was possible for men not only to hear the word but to see it, to retain it for further consideration, to interpret it by seeing it within its context. It is true that at first sight men of that day may seem to have *seen* little more than a collection of abstract symbols. But in the case of the Bible in particular (and in a measure this is also true of the great myths and epics and legends of antiquity which were becoming available) the language so often corresponded directly with scenes and places and incidents and so often drew vivid pen-portraits of persons, that through reading the Bible men found themselves looking out upon the hills of Palestine and even catching glimpses of the Son of God journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Since the invention of printing, other devices have facilitated the extension of the word, while the increasing skill of the photographer has made for the rapid reproduction and distribution of the image. But now at length the medium has been discovered by which word and image together can be instantaneously conveyed and reproduced within wider and wider circles of human life. Much has still to be done to improve transmission and to perfect reception, but there is little doubt that ultimately it will be possible for a person in one part of the world to receive both a visual impression and a verbal message from almost any other part of the world.

Surely no medium ever yet discovered offers greater possibilities to the Christian evangelist as he seeks to extend the communication of the Image of God in Christ and of the good news of what God has done in Christ.

Not that this new medium puts all other means of communication out of court. The importance of the person to person encounter and indeed of the communication from an individual or a small group to a limited community in a familiar setting cannot possibly be exaggerated. Here is the indispensable medium for final and decisive Christian communication. Yet there are these other means, at a lower level of intensity, at a wider range of outreach, but all in some way preparing the ground for the kind of final communication which touches a man at the very depths and limits of his existence. These other means capture the interest, stimulate the imagination, open doors to adventure, offer a way of richer experience. And of these none is so powerful as that which can convey both the animated symbol (the cartoon) and the pattern of living experience (Live Action) into the very homes of the people. It may be suggested that the cartoon is the modern equivalent of the New Testament parable and could be used for the same purpose: certainly, the parallel to the 'mighty works' which Jesus performed and which enabled men to see a new power working in their midst could be provided by examples of Christianity in action in our contemporary world—televised programmes revealing before men's eyes that the power of the living Christ is still operative in human life.

Experiments are waiting to be made, techniques are waiting to be investigated. It is altogether doubtful whether television is the best means for communicating certain large aspects of Christian truth and certain critical proclamations of the Christian gospel. At the same time the Christian Churches dare not let this new and most powerful medium go by default. This is not a time for new buildings: nor is it a time for the creation of new institutional machinery. It is a time rather for ensuring that as 'information' of all kinds courses through the world's channels of communication, the most important 'information' ever given to man shall not be left out. The task is supremely difficult. But it is still possible where men are so moved by the Divine Spirit that they cannot but communicate the things which they have seen and heard.