

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 *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Theology of Communication

BY THE REV. PROF. F. W. DILLISTONE, D.D.

I

DURING the past few years I have been privileged to work at a Theological College which is situated in the neighbourhood of two of the most famous educational institutions in America. Just across the common from us is Harvard, the oldest University in the United States, with a great tradition of studies in the arts and the humanities ; just down the river from us is the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, probably the most celebrated and the most up-to-date establishment of its kind in America. Here research is being carried forward in every branch of applied science and one of the most interesting of its sections is the Department of Cybematics, the name given to the science of communicating machines. At the Head of this Department is a stocky, near-sighted figure, Norbert Wiener by name, who has succeeded in constructing robot men and mechanical brains of almost uncanny efficiency. Recently he has described his work and examined its implications in two important volumes, one of which is entitled " The Human Use of Human Beings ". He himself is well aware of the frightful dangers to human life which lurk in these new mechanical contrivances and for this reason he is concerned to raise the crucial question : " What is the essential difference between man as such and the mechanical man which he has succeeded in creating ? "

At the very outset he asks what it is about man which differentiates him from all other animals and finds no difficulty in answering his own question. It is the impulse to communicate with his fellows. " There are," he says, " animals besides man which are social, and live in a continuous relation to their fellow-creatures but there is none in whom this desire for communication, or rather this necessity for communication is the guiding motive of their whole life ". But man does not only communicate with his fellow humans. For a long time now he has known how to communicate to a machine an impulse which will cause it to perform a regular cycle of movements over and over again. Such a mechanism we call a clockwork model : its essential property is that with due care it can be trusted to perform an exact set of operations with complete efficiency and regularity. More recently, however, other remarkable developments have been taking place. The newer type of mechanism, which we call a communicating machine, possesses sense organs which enable it to receive a wide variety of messages into its structure. The radio or television set, the photo-electric door opener and the electronic computing machine are well known examples. The last named is the most complicated of all for it has the property of retaining in a certain sense the memory of past data and of acting in accordance with a variegated pattern of accumulated experience.

We live, then, in a day when machines can both receive messages and impart communications. Wherein do they differ any longer from man himself? Simply in this, that they are unable to give back to their controllers anything which can be called original or creative. They can respond with astonishing alacrity if the communication which they receive is related in the proper way to their former intake. In other words, they can reflect, repeat, record, combine. But they cannot originate; they cannot, as it were, repudiate or deny their past. They are amazingly responsive: they can never be truly responsible. In this respect man is still unique or at least is still potentially unique. Potentially, I say, because one of the most sinister dangers threatening the world to-day is that man will allow himself to become nothing more than a communicating machine. He will receive through his sense organs all that is put into him by the aid of the infinitely varied mechanical instruments invented by modern scientists. He will store his information and give the appropriate response to every subsequent stimulus. But he will never startle the world by saying: 'Here I stand: I can no other: so help me God'. He will simply reflect the traditions and customs and pressures and demands which come to him from the society in which he lives—without ever becoming a truly responsible person who finds himself in and through his creative communications with God and his fellow-men.

This then is the first theological question which arises in any consideration of the nature of communication. What is man? Is he a rather neat and supple communicating machine or is he a responsible agent who can say Yes or No, who can defy social conventions and logical consistences and take the leap of faith out into the unknown? Does he simply feed back that which has been put into him or can he speak the word which startles and surprises and makes all things new? Is he mass-man, robot-man, or is he man in the Divine image who has never entirely lost the capacity to respond to the word of God in which he was created? This is one of the critical theological questions of our time and the nature of Christian communication is bound to depend in large measure upon the way in which this question is answered.

II

What then shall we say about the *content* of the Christian communication? One of the most gratifying features of the theological scene during the past twenty-five years has been the revival of interest in and concern for the essential Christian Gospel. Through the work of Dodd in this country, Cullmann on the Continent, Bowman in America—to name but a few representative scholars—we have been led to focus our attention afresh upon the Apostolic *kerygma*, the earliest Christian confession of faith, the Gospel which bears witness to the incarnate life, the atoning death and the victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. There would be little difference of opinion to-day about what constituted the original Evangel—that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, that God so loved the world that He gave His Son, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That is the Good News, the mystery hid from the ages but

now revealed to the sons of men. For this re-discovery of the essential Gospel we may well be deeply thankful.

But there is a danger even in the fact that by the processes of the most rigorous historical analysis and literary criticism we have come to hold a firmer conviction about what the original Apostolic Gospel actually was. The danger is that having discovered it afresh we shall admire it and rejoice in it and be comforted by it and shall cease to do the one thing that ought to be done with it—namely to communicate it in forms and images meaningful to our own day. One of the principles which Professor Wiener regards as fundamental is that in no department of life can information be *stored* without suffering an overwhelming depreciation of its value. In the whole science of communication, information is to be regarded as continuing to live while in process, not in storage : that is to say, unless information is for ever renewing itself on some larger stage or in some wider context it grows stale and vapid and loses both its savour and its relevance. The Gospel of God cannot be stored in a creed or in a baptismal confession or even in a core of primitive Apostolic testimony. It must be continually communicated in the power of the living Spirit if it is to retain its vitality and renew its power.

The point has been made in a somewhat different fashion by Brunner in his recently translated work on *Christian Dogmatics*. In this book he makes a distinction between *dogmatic* theology (which consists essentially in reflecting upon the Divine Revelation given through the Scriptures) and *missionary* theology (which is concerned with the situation of the man who hears and with the way in which the Gospel can be related to his needs). Missionary theology, he claims, must take the form of a conversation between the believer and the unbeliever. It must seek to remove the hindrances which lie between the Gospel and the hearer. It needs desperately to be done in our own day. "The Catholic Church," Brunner writes, "has recognized this and has set mighty forces to work to achieve this task : Protestant theology, however, still manages to ignore it and even dismisses the very idea with contempt. This contempt may even prove its own destruction". These are strong words. I am not certain, myself, that it is possible to uphold Brunner's original distinction. Dogmatic theology which is not missionary theology, at least indirectly, seems to me to be of little value or interest. Moreover, I doubt if Evangelical theology has ever reached the stage of ignoring the task of missionary theology entirely. Nevertheless we can all afford to take Brunner's words to heart and see as the supreme task of our age the building up of a truly missionary theology which is at every point concerned with the precise needs of the unbelieving world and with the way in which the Christian Gospel can bring to those needs the healing and satisfying resources of the limitless grace of God.

III

This brings us to our final question. How is the Gospel to be communicated to the world in which we live? This question of communication, it may be noted, is one which concerns not only the preacher and the evangelist but also the poet, the novelist, the artist

and the dramatist. Each in his own way is faced with the same problem. For example, a recent book dealing with the writings of W. H. Auden says this: "The phenomena of modern life—the super-cinemas, the barnyard press and all the rest are known to everyone. To the writer who is also a moralist they have a significance—as the symptoms of a profound disease—which he must strive to make clear to his audience, an audience which is itself implicated in the cancerous state of affairs. But most people have lost the habit of listening, indeed the ability to listen, to their parable writers. . . . So somehow the writer, spread eagled between the two worlds, has to evolve understandable signals, has at the least to communicate with that small proportion from all grades of society which feels in some way as he does". Faced with this situation Auden has tried all kinds of adjustments in form, in technique, in vocabulary, in allusion. He is seeking always to bridge the gap, to relate his message to the actual situation, to communicate with men of his own time—and so the struggle with words and forms and patterns of thought never ceases.

Fundamentally, of course, the problem is that which has confronted the translator at all times. He sets to work to translate the Gospel-message into a foreign tongue. That sounds a relatively simple matter. Yet what travail is involved in putting a single significant sentence into another language! Let a man try to put the words 'God so loved the world' into a language which has a very inadequate or ambiguous term for God and a grievously misleading word for love and a terribly limited conception of world—and he will know something of the problem. Only by living amongst the people, only by becoming familiar with the framework of the universe from which their basic language is chiefly derived, only by sharing those experiences by which their language is modified and enriched, can he begin to give an arresting translation of even the simplest affirmations of the Christian Gospel. But are we in a very different situation in our modern scientific, technological, post-Christian world? Do men understand our language any longer? What does the word 'God' mean to them? the word 'love'? the word 'world'?

One thing is certain. Communication can never take place if we seek merely to encase the Gospel in correct primitive phraseology and do nothing to acquaint ourselves with the forms, patterns, symbols, idioms, conventions of modern life. In his autobiography the poet Stephen Spender tells of his experiences during the war in the National Fire Service. He became involved in a scheme of education, organized by the firemen themselves, and he went from station to station lecturing and leading discussion groups. He describes how he used to talk about different types of writing to men who had had little opportunity to learn the distinction between the good and the bad in any forms of literature. He felt that much of what he said was elementary and even crude "but was amazed", he writes, "to discover how by talking in terms of *their* experiences and perceptions I could always arouse the interest of my fellow firemen. . . . Yet, whenever it happened that we had a clergyman at a discussion group, he always talked doctrine and theology, or else advanced childish arguments against science". That is a severe criticism. Whether justified or

not, the important point is surely contained in the phrase 'in terms of *their* experiences and perceptions'. Unless the Gospel can be communicated in *those* terms, it cannot begin to become relevant and meaningful to our contemporary world.

IV

In the last resort this, too, is a theological issue for it is all related to the doctrine of Creation. Alas, Evangelical Theology has paid all too little attention to this doctrine largely because of its overwhelming concern with the doctrine of Redemption. But the Good News of Redemption cannot be proclaimed into a vacuum; the context of proclamation must be either a fixed structure or a developing process. All too often Christian apologists have assumed the first alternative. It is simpler and more manageable in every way. But it is really quite untenable. We live in a *changing* universe, a world whose keynote is movement not fixity, process not rigidity. The Paradox of our existence is that the unchanging Gospel has to be proclaimed in a changing world, the eternal Word of God has to become incarnate within a particular age, the gulf between God and man has to be bridged again and again by a new translation of the word 'love' into contemporary language-forms. This is the Cross of reality on which the Christian evangelist is ever stretched as he seeks to be identified with the Word Who became flesh, the Son of God Who was born of the seed of David in the days of Caesar Augustus.

A few months ago *The Times* printed a striking review by its dramatic critic of a religious film, 'Behold the Man'. I should like to quote part of it, for it seems to me to bring to a focus much of what I have tried to say.

"Superficially it seems that the technical merits of a film which has the passion of Christ as its subject should be of very little moment. What should matter, it might be argued, is that the approach and treatment should be reverent and well-meaning. (But then, so, after their fashion, were the approach to and treatment of *The Song of Bernadette* and the companion films in the Hollywood religious cycle). Reverence is not enough; indeed, it tends, if working in isolation, to reduce the tremendous emotional and intellectual content of revealed Christianity to a flat and insipid formula. What is wanted is a religious film with a violently iconoclastic disregard for tradition. (Remembering what Eisenstein did with the coronation of Ivan the Terrible, is it not permissible to wonder what he might have done with the Crowning with Thorns?)

"*Behold the Man* (the film of the Westminster Passion Play presented by the Companions of the Cross) does not unfortunately attempt to break out of the convention that religious films must move with a ponderous slowness. It does not seek to shock, to startle, in the great cause of presenting the story and character of Christ as something far more important and moving than normal cinema audiences have ever glimpsed in all their long experience of synthetic wonder and glamour. The shocking and the startling, not by means of physical horror but of a ruthlessly dramatic demonstration of the issues involved, might indeed be an extreme way of accomplishing great ends, but it is not

with high ambition and great risk that *Behold the Man* is concerned. It is content to preach an unexceptionable sermon to the converted and it does so with no little skill and persuasion."

What a devastating conclusion! There surely is our danger—to preach unexceptionable sermons to the converted with no little skill and persuasion. Our task, then, as I conceive it, is to regain a true insight into the nature of the man to whom the Gospel is to be communicated, to grasp afresh the content and the dynamic of that Gospel, and to dedicate ourselves anew to the high ambition and great risk of proclaiming that Gospel in terms which men can understand and in forms which will bring meaning into the perplexity and confusion of the world in which they live.

The Everlasting Gospel in the Context of To-day

BY THE REV. W. F. P. CHADWICK, M.A.

THE subject for our thought in this concluding address is the problem which confronts us all to-day, the problem of evangelism in the context of our modern situation. In talking to His disciples our Lord once likened the Church to the leaven in the mass of the dough. There is a significant difference between the situation there envisaged and that with which we are faced in our modern world. For whereas the dough by the very law of its nature must respond to the action of the leaven, there is no such compulsion in the soul of man to respond to the Gospel when it is preached to him. That at least is how we feel about it. It was not the way our Lord felt. We to-day are conscious of the difficulty of response. Men and women exist in their thousands for whom, as we are tempted to feel, religion is a fourth dimension, something right outside their comprehension. Does that mean that to-day the message of the Gospel is out of date? Or does it mean that somehow or other we have allowed our view-point to be distorted? In order to answer that question I want to look first at the past and then at the present.

I

Look first at the past, at that wonderful picture of the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus which is presented to us in the Synoptic Gospels. What appears in that picture too clearly to be mistaken is that Jesus Christ came to the masses. His ministry was not in any sense a circumscribed ministry. It was not directed to any one section of the people. If we allow ourselves to imagine the scene as the Sermon on the Mount is delivered we see in the front ranks the eager faces of the disciples, and then, behind them, rank upon rank of