

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE: COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT

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Introduction

The challenge of speaking the truth in love has been with humankind since the beginning. The earliest accounts of human interaction attest to the possibilities of interaction and communication going awry. The end result is often conflict. As a consequence, we are surprisingly well adapted to existing in an environment where communication and conflict are often present.

Clearly, our preferences note our desire for peaceable discourse that encourages and allows constructive discourse and the exchange of ideas. In reality, thanks to the ubiquitous presence of the media, this grand desire remains an elusive hope. Rarely can we tune across the television channels without being bombarded by bombast, scurrilous criticism, innuendo, and a general absence of manners. Increasingly, such tendencies are even amplified when one reads the comment sections following an Internet story. In such settings of faceless, nameless anonymity, there is often an amplification of ruthlessness.

In this paper the reader will find a modest proposal that we examine the challenge of speaking the truth in love from several perspectives. First, we shall think about communication and conflict. Second, we shall imagine communication without conflict. Finally, we shall examine possibilities of communication in truth and love.

Communication and Conflict

In thinking about communication and conflict there are many possible ways in which communication and conflict might interact. For our discussion here, we shall look at four:

1. Communication in conflict
2. Communication through conflict
3. Communication above conflict
4. Communication beyond conflict

Communication in conflict

How do we look at conflict? What do we see when we look at conflict? Is conflict inherently bad, or is conflict simply neutral?

If one prefers to think of conflict as inherently negative or counterproductive, one is likely to seek those means of reducing conflict. There are many means available to those who believe conflict is always negative. Without resorting to a litany of terminologies from the domain of psychology, some terms quickly come to mind: avoidance, management, accommodation, negotiation, and undoubtedly many others. Many of us often adapt a particular methodology that serves us whenever we experience conflict.

To indulge a personal reference, the writer grew up in the home of an itinerant evangelist. Simply put, we lived in a travel trailer, moving from church-to-church every two weeks, holding revivals in local churches. Home schooled, my brother and I missed the socialization experiences available in public schools, continuing existence in a settled community, and were continuously moving from one new location to another. Perhaps we learned to deal with the inevitable conflict generated by four people living in a miniscule environment, but on the other hand, perhaps we “avoided” the more intrusive conflict one sustains when one’s value is diminished. Such diminishment of value may be inferred by the criticism of one’s position, values, or beliefs.

Marshall McLuhan in his seminal work, “The Medium is the Message,” wrote: “Cardinal Newman said of Napoleon: ‘He understood the grammar of gunpowder.’” McLuhan understood the dialectic between content and medium. At the same time, he also argued that the medium delivering the content is in reality another expression of content.

Is it possible that a case could be made in our times that conflict is now an essential element in communication, and that it is increasingly incumbent upon us to differentiate between the content and the medium because they are often aligned in such a way as to render them inseparable?

Communication through conflict

For argument’s sake, let us say that content and medium can actually be separated into components which when combined can produce communication. Communication depends on a “burden;” a cause or a mission. The underlying purpose of communication is to create, extend, enhance, or nurture dialog. What happens when the value of the content is insufficient to warrant attention? How does one “amp” up the attraction-scale of the content? Oddly enough, conflict is often employed.

This is not the just the legitimate conflict that exists between differences arising from positions, opinions, or conclusions. This is conflict employed as both medium as well as content. The use of this device is as old as conversation itself. Conflict takes on the character of content as it is co-opted as a strategy to reinforce the main content of the communications. For example, some Television networks push preposterous positions or opinions by mounting the offensive of badgering, leap-frogging, and attempting to talk over opponents, especially on so-called talk shows. In such situations, the conflict is just as much a part of the content as is the message of the communication.

This strategy reminds one of the old joke about the minister preparing to preach the sermon of the week to the congregation. As the preacher reviews the sermon notes and outline, a notation is made: “Logic weak here. Yell louder!”

Not infrequently, the quality of argument offered in the original communication lacks sufficient legitimacy to convince, inspire, move to action, or change an opinion. Conflict offers a potential venue for ensuring greater attraction power of a weak argument by overpowering or intimidating the receiver.

Communication above conflict

Another way of describing this would be to think of communication in spite of conflict. There is a certain subtlety of technique employed among experienced communicators that recognizes the “scope-and-sequence” of accompanying conflict as adjunct content. If one spends any time watching television talk shows, one will occasionally witness a guest tapping into a higher order of communication skill. Such guests recognize the fact that conflict is being commandeered into the role of adjunct content. They intuitively recognize the bankruptcy of this secondary level of content, and they adjust their responses to attenuate the volume and force of the conflict in order to disarm it.

A newspaper reporter was asked about a particular politician and his ability to communicate his positions to the media. The reporter remarked that the politician was adept at deftly deflecting the “noise” of conflict, enabling him to “stay on message” by avoiding entanglement in the complexity or even subterfuge of secondary content, e.g. conflict.

As a “ham” radio operator, the writer often dealt with “signal-to-noise” challenges when ferreting out a weak signal from the cacophony of interference, static, and nearby-signals of greater strength. In public discourse, there is often an adverse “signal-to-noise” ratio in which the primary content of communication is difficult to translate with clarity and precision. This is due to the presence of background noise, irrelevant or even meaningless sounds.

Technology offers the radio operator a variety of means of reducing excessive noise that corrupts and clutters a desired signal. Of the means most effective are noise attenuation circuits that mix incoming signals with noise blanking features, thus rendering the signal easier to hear. Other options include filters which are set to attenuate specific frequencies so that while the noise on the signal is still present, the receiver hears the filtered signal more clearly.

Communication in the realm of public discourse must employ techniques designed to accomplish similar features, especially where conflict has been employed as secondary content designed to act as “signal-to-noise” interference. Moving from our hypothetical illustration from the world of radio circuitry, effective communication requires one to understand the full range of content being engaged in the communication. It is important at this point, however, to recognize the fact that effective communication involves skills that recognize the intrinsic character of both primary and secondary content (noise, or conflict) and be able to adopt a communication technique that attenuates such noise in order that proper discourse can occur.

Communication beyond conflict

To return to the illustration from radio technology will permit us to expand our consideration of the proposal that communication beyond conflict is not only possible, but necessary.

Engineers spend much time examining the characteristics of tangential noise on the radio frequency spectrum. They know that atmospheric conditions can create interference much like the static crashes one would hear when listening to an AM radio station in a pending electrical storm. There are radio frequencies emanating from Space that challenge even the best receiver

circuitry. These engineers must understand the problem before they can create potential solutions. There is a parallel between their work and the work of those involved in communications within the sphere of public discourse.

In simplified terms, engaging in meaningful discourse regarding differing opinions that are valued and tenaciously held, requires us to be knowledgeable of both primary subject matter as content and the noise of conflict that constitutes secondary content. In some religious and theological circles, one only need mention any one of several terms that have all the impact of a red cape in the face of a charging bull. Mention Emergent Churches, spiritual formation, or prayer labyrinths, and the noise of conflict begins. There is probably a significant array of reasons for this. Let's consider some:

- Some communicators exhibit a greater knowledge of secondary content than of the primary content. There may be an eagerness to paint individuals with a broad brush, insisting they are enemies of the true church because they read Brian McLaren or attend a spiritual formation event at a religious function. They really do not have a sophisticated grasp of the nuances of theological reflection and praxis, and so create a high “signal-to-noise” ratio by framing the discourse in an “us-versus-them” context. They exaggerate, embellish, and dramatize their critique by relying on the power of conflict, or the volume of the noise to distract the listener from the inadequacy of their knowledge.
- Some communicators prefer a “doomsday” scenario in which they can paint disastrous consequences as inevitabilities because they are merely parroting ideas and content they have picked along the way. We refer to this as the “sky-is-falling” attitude. Wikipedia offers this interesting commentary about this well-known phrase: “The basic motif and many of the elements of the tale can also be found within Buddhist scriptures as the Daddabha Jataka (J 322).¹ In this a hare disturbed by a falling fruit believes that the earth is coming to an end and starts a stampede among the other animals. A lion halts them, investigates the cause of the panic and restores calm. The fable teaches the necessity for deductive reasoning and subsequent investigation.”

Lacking such deductive reasoning and failing to conduct even cursory investigation, the proponents of very conservative positions often see the sky falling in the presence of change.

To communicate beyond conflict requires willingness to play the part of the lion in Buddhist tale. Just as the lion initiated a proper investigation that revealed the truth, communication beyond conflict requires such wisdom, propriety, and intentional action.

Communication without Conflict

In this section, we shall think about communication without conflict. While this may seem to be an elusive goal, it is possible that our investigation might lead to renewed understanding and appreciation for age-old truths that accompany superior communication strategies.

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henny_Penny_\(fable\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henny_Penny_(fable))

Communication is not coercion

One of the most complete descriptions of coercion is stated this way:

- The reliance on intense interpersonal and psychological attack to destabilize an individual's sense of self to promote compliance.
- The use of an organized peer group.
- Applying interpersonal pressure to promote conformity.
- The manipulation of the totality of the person's social environment to stabilize behavior once modified.²

As one reviews the cacophony of communication initiatives employed by those groups assured that the Church of the Nazarene has lost its way, it is interesting to note the employment of coercive methods. Some individuals have experienced intense personal attack in the blogosphere and other Internet communication venues at the hands of these individuals. Others have been “labelled” with what their enemies perceive to be pejorative and deleterious terms and they have attempted to equate those labels with theological heresy. The image that comes to mind is that of a kangaroo court where the accused are tried in absentia, without representation, and are found guilty.

Fortunately, there is an underlying reality that must be acknowledged for everyone engaging in public discourse in the USA. A quote from the Harvard Law Review is in order here:

“In the realm of religious faith, and in that of political belief, sharp differences arise. In both fields the tenets of one man may seem the rankest error to his neighbor. To persuade others to his own point of view, the pleader, as we know, at times, resorts to exaggeration, to vilification of men who have been, or are, prominent in church or state, and even to false statement. But the people of this nation have ordained in the light of history, that, in spite of the probability of excesses and abuses, these liberties are, in the long view, essential to enlightened opinion and right conduct on the part of the citizens of a democracy.

The essential characteristic of these liberties is, that under their shield many types of life, character, opinion and belief can develop unmolested and unobstructed. Nowhere is this shield more necessary than in our own country for a people composed of many races and of many creeds.”³

Speaking the truth in love can clearly acknowledge the wonderful array of freedoms that guarantee public discourse, especially within the sphere and domain of religious and theological discussion. The “shield” of which the US Supreme Court spoke, protects religious beliefs and

²<http://www.xs4all.nl/~anco/mental/randr/ofshe.htm>

³ HeinOnline -- 103 *Harvard Law Review* 629 1989-1990

opinions from obstruction or molestation. Coercion, on the other hand, even if it is a milder form, endeavors to cast aspersions, undermine trust and integrity, and ignore the shield of protection guaranteed all Americans under the constitution. In some examples of public discourse, the line that separates criticism from libel has been dangerously breached by reckless rhetoric.

Coercion attempts to destabilize an environment through the use of harsh or overly-radicalized rhetoric and communication. This may be augmented by the organization of peer groups as combative resources arrayed against what is clearly normative tradition and theological expression. Online groups, blogs, and Websites are used to communicate the appearance of legitimacy and solidarity. The intent is to suggest a larger constituency than is actually extant.

The US Supreme Court has articulately spelled out the protective shield of freedoms enabling constructive discourse regarding theological and religious opinions. Employment of coercive means inhibits discursively formed communication.

“Even if we understand discourse as not always aimed at rational consensus, a discursively formed public opinion requires more than guaranteeing that no one is excluded from discourse, that everyone may speak his or her piece, and that no one may be coerced. Discourse under the aforementioned conditions will be successful only if participants adopt attitudes of equal respect and impartiality. The rules of discourse stipulate that we must treat one another as equal partners in the process of deliberating about principles that will govern our collective interaction, who we are, and what we want, and the means to achieve a collective good. This means that each individual must be given the opportunity to speak her piece and stand up and say yes or no to a proposal. But, in addition to the negative requirement that individuals be given the space and opportunity to speak, productive discourses contain the positive requirement that individuals listen to one another, respond to one another, and justify their positions to one another. To treat one another as equal dialogue partners means that we must start from the assumption that each participant has something potentially worthwhile to contribute to the discourse; that each participant deserves to have his or her claims considered. This embodies the Kantian idea that respect involves treating people as ends in themselves and not merely as means. Strategic actors view their dialogue partners as means: as either limiting or enabling them in the pursuit of their ends. Communicative actors view their dialogue partners as ends in themselves as autonomous agents whose capacity for rational judgment must be respected. Most day-to-day interaction is a combination of these two orientations. Discourse, as an idealization of communicative action, asks participants to exclude all strategic and instrumental attitudes toward interlocutors from the conversation.”⁴

Some Conclusions

⁴From Simon Chambers "Discourse and Democratic Practices" *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas* <http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/cavalier/Forum/info/Chambers.html>

Obviously this topic begs questions that cannot be addressed here. It is essential, however, that the Body of Christ not fall prey to the caricatures of communication practiced by the world. Communicating the truth in love implies humility, collegiality, and precision. While we know that Jesus is the Truth, we possess this knowledge in jars of clay. It is tempting to think that our formulation; our definitions express more than just reliable scholarship. We may be tempted to believe that we have an obligation to impose our perspectives on others.

Humility is not a virtue that is highly praised by the pundits that pummel each other on the airwaves and on the Internet. Humility, however, is the cornerstone of winsome communications. Arrogance usurps intelligence, demanding mindless alignment with the shrill proclamations of johnny-come-lately, self-proclaimed custodians of the Christian faith.

We must resist any attempt or temptation to conform to the methodologies of this present age. At the same time, we have every right to expose the shameless incorporation of demagogic methods, demanding that those who call themselves Christian express the values of love, humility, and tolerance. Let us be aware that while the internecine battles over non-essentials rages, humankind is grinding away under the unrelenting load that only Jesus can lift.