

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE: COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT

Scott Turcott
Eastern Nazarene College

Introduction

Why does conflict appear to be such a prevalent part of communication in our world today? Can we communicate without conflict? Why do many of us find it difficult to communicate about issues on which we disagree without being combative? Is it acceptable to have conflict in our communication?

These are all questions I have pondered for the past twenty years. As I began teaching, at what was then, a small Midwestern Christian University, these questions came to the forefront for me as I tried to deepen my understanding of communication in my efforts to be a better teacher.

I was delighted when I was one of several asked to share my thoughts on the topic at hand in a reflective scholarly essay. The project became even more exciting for me when we were asked to keep the writing conversational in nature. I have to admit I prefer writing with a conversational tone to some of the other methods of scholarly writing. I appreciate the writings of two dear Christian brothers, Em Griffin and Quentin Schultze, who use this approach well and write about communication in ways that my students found accessible and inviting.

In an effort to address the topic at hand it might be helpful to first build a foundation by finding some common understanding of communication and conflict, second ask ourselves some key questions, third take a look at an example, and finally consider an approach for speaking the truth in love. Perhaps as we consider the items suggested, we can create a path to improved dialogue with all our partners in communication.

Foundation

First let's take a look at the nature of communication and of conflict. It's necessary to have context and common ground in all communication in order for communication to be effective. Why do we communicate? Inherent in this question is a second. What is communication?

Communication is a gift from God. It is a gift that comes with tremendous power. It also comes with responsibility. Communication, in order to be understood, requires some sense of context. In an effort to provide context I'll share a brief synopsis of my understanding of what communication is.

It is necessary to preface this synopsis by giving credit to the many scholars who have influenced my thinking about the nature of communication. Four have been pivotal. Em Griffin, a retired professor from Wheaton whose text – though aimed at undergraduates looking at communication theory for the first time – changed the way I view communication. Barnett Pearce whose perspective on persons-in-conversation and the way we shape each other through communication

changed the way I enter a conversation. Martin Buber, whose ideas on the nature of relationship are so heavily rooted in dialogue it magnifies the importance of communication. Quentin Schultze, whose ideas about the nature of communication as a tool for building community profoundly impact the way I communicate and think about communication in the home, at church, in the workplace and the many other settings where we communicate.

I consider myself a theistic social constructionist when considering the questions of communication. A social constructionist position is one that believes we construct our social realities as we interact. In other words as we communicate we co-create our social world. As a theistic social constructionist I believe God plays a key role in our constructions.

In the first chapter of Genesis we read that God spoke our physical world into existence with the phrase, “let there be ...” followed by each of the key parts of creation. We also read that God created us in His own image and likeness. Then a little later we read that God brings the animals before the first person for naming. Genesis 2:19 says, “He brought them (the animals) to the man to see what he would name them (like He didn’t already know); and whatever the man called each living creature that was its name.” So, just as God spoke the physical world into existence He gave us the power to speak our social world into existence. We have the power to create social reality.

As we embark on this process and a conversation progresses we move through an interchange of what we can label communication acts. These acts could be a single word, a sentence, a paragraph, or maybe a look or even tone of voice. In order to understand any individual act we must look at it in the context of the acts that precede and follow it. We must also look at the relationship between ourselves and the person we are communicating with as well as a number of other contextual factors. With this basic understanding of communication we can now look at the goal of communication.

The goal of all communication is to achieve shared meaning. Regardless of what we may be trying to do with our communication we can only achieve it if we first achieve shared meaning. Whether we are trying to persuade, inform, or entertain, we must first achieve shared meaning. What is shared meaning? Perfect shared meaning would be having what is in the mind of Person A at the moment a message is conceived to be in perfect alignment with what is in the mind of Person B at the moment the message is received. Because all communication involves the use of a medium, this perfect alignment is not possible. A medium is an extension of some part of the self. These extensions introduce the opportunity for distortion.

Back to the first question, why do we communicate? We communicate to meet our needs and accomplish our goals. Ultimately we communicate to achieve shared meaning. Shared meaning is at least twofold. The first, the basic level, is accomplished when the message as conceived in the mind of Person A matches the message as perceived by Person B. As already indicated

communication at this level is elusive due to the fact that human communication requires a medium. If it is elusive at this most basic level, what hope do we have for successful communication at the next level which is when the successful transmission and reception of a message results in Person B accepting, acting on, or being amused by what was intended by Person A?

When we communicate we tend to focus our efforts at the second level. There are a multitude of reasons for this. All of these reasons cannot be examined in this essay. The simple reasons are related to the fact that we are focused on meeting our needs and accomplishing our goals. The more complicated reasons are related to the fact that communication is such a complicated task. When we are intently focused on meeting our needs and accomplishing our goals we do not always have the mental energy and capacity to focus on being certain that the message being sent is the message being received.

The complexity of the act of communication requires the use of some shortcuts. These shortcuts rely heavily on assumptions. These assumptions are dependent on a certain amount of common ground existing between the persons involved in conversation. It should be noted that we often tend to believe we have more common ground than actually exists. Consequently the use of shortcuts and assumptions to simplify the communication process can inadvertently lead to conflict. However, if we did not utilize these shortcuts communication would become so cumbersome it would be difficult to use it as a vehicle for meeting our needs and accomplishing our goals.

If one sees communication only as a tool for the meeting of needs or accomplishing of goals one is likely to see the other party involved in our communication as an object. When we see the other as object we cannot speak the truth in love. One of the difficulties inherent in seeing the other as an object is that we then begin to see them as a tool for our purposes as well.

At this point it becomes necessary to examine a theology of communication. Communication, community, and communion all come from the same root. Communication at its best is an act of communion that results in harmonious community. Scripture makes it clear we were designed to live in communion with God when it says in His image He created us. Scripture also makes it clear we were designed to live in community with one another when it says God saw that it was not good for “the man” to be alone and then created a companion.

Both communion and community imply relationship. The nature of a relationship is generally determined by the quality and quantity of communication. As beings created in the image of God we must first attend to our relationship with Him. In the New Testament Jesus tells each of us you must love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. The repetition of the words “all your” appears to be a clear emphasis of the need to commit the entire self to our

relationship with God. We are also told we must love our neighbor as ourselves. If we are to have effective communication we must follow both of these admonitions.

In an effort to achieve shared meaning on what communication is I offer this brief working definition. Communication is the process by which we engage others through the creation and interpretation of messages to achieve shared meaning.

Now that we have a basic understanding of what communication is let's turn our attention to building a common understanding of conflict. We tend to view conflict as negative rather than looking at it as neutral. It seems to me that this is because we confuse conflict with the way conflict manifests itself.

If we view conflict as the result of natural tensions that exist we might be able to see it in a different light. It is the surface tension of water that allows rain to fall in drops that refresh plants rather than sheets that would crush them. It is the tension that exists between the weights of two massive beams that make it possible for opposing rafters to hold up a roof. It is the tension that results in a relationship from naturally opposing desires like those for intimacy and autonomy that peak our emotions and keep the relationship interesting. Holding to this view of conflict I would contend that it is not conflict that is bad but the way we manage it.

In other words it's not the fact that we disagree that is a problem. It's the way that we choose to handle the fact that we disagree and the process by which we attempt to manage our disagreement that can be problematic. Poorly managed conflict can manifest itself in many aspects of our communication. This leads to questions of how we manage conflict when trying to speak the truth in love.

Questions

Let's take a look at some questions that might be helpful in our attempt to find ways to speak the truth in love. There are many questions we could ask as we attempt to speak the truth in love. We'll focus on three that could prove useful.

The first question we'll examine is do we value the other member of the conversation? Maybe a better question would be how we value the other member of the conversation. Do we see that person as a being created like ourselves in the image of God? Do we love the person as we love ourselves? Or to frame the question as Buber might do we view them as an "It" or a "You"? As I read Buber's *I-Thou* it appears to point to a treatment of the other similar to the treatment of others Christ is calling for when he calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves. If we value the other as we do the self, speaking the truth in love will be a more attainable goal.

The next question to consider is what do we want to accomplish with this conversation? The participants in every conversation have some goal for that conversation. Sometimes the goal is as basic as passing the time. Relationship development is a second goal we might have for

conversation. Another goal might be a simple exchange of information as a means of acquiring new knowledge. In light of our current topic the goal is occasionally the exchange of ideas in an attempt to influence the other party in the conversation. All too often this goal deteriorates into how I become the victor in this conflict. In other words how do I win? When one or both parties in a conversation end up at this point a conversation ceases to be a way to build community and becomes merely a tool for accomplishing one's own purposes and perhaps even a weapon for the destruction of another. If we sense we are headed in this direction with our conversation perhaps we need to ask ourselves another question.

The third question to consider is who will I be after this conversation? All communication has consequences. One consequence is that the way we communicate with others impacts them in such a way that who they have become as a result of our communication now impacts us. It's similar to the sentence children say to one another when someone says something to them they don't like. "Everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you." It doesn't work quite the way children intend when they make that statement but it is not far off.

The influence we have on another in a conversation impacts them and because they are now different they interact with us differently than they would have prior to our conversation and as a result we are now different. The result is the way we speak and act toward others to some extent determines who we become. If we wish to become the persons we desire to be then we must act toward others as the person we desire to be would act.

Example

Now that we have a foundation and have considered some questions let's reflect on an example. It should be an example that gets at the root of the topic for discussion. One of the core issues relating to communication and conflict is how we treat our partner in conversation that results in conflict. Let's navigate an example and explore the issues and principles involved simultaneously.

Where do we look for an example to examine the issue of communication and conflict? There are many to choose from. Do we look to health care? Would tax reform be better? What about the issue of creation versus evolution? All of these are emotionally charged issues and lend themselves to conversations that could end in conflict. This is not necessarily a problem. The problem is when the conflict becomes unmanageable and the parties involved are looking to be the victor in the conflict instead of treating the other as self.

Several years ago a student of mine who had gone on to graduate school told me of a course she was taking on communication and civility. The conversation that ensued was intriguing and led to reflection on the state of civility in communication in our culture in this age of almost limitless and often boundless electronic communication. While a lack of civility in communication is

certainly not a new phenomenon in society I would contend it has certainly increased at rapid rate in this age of electronic communication.

For our example let's create a generic one so that our focus is on civility and communication and not an issue that might generate conflict. You and I are leading public figures on a significant issue of public discussion. Let's say we have competing views on this issue. Over a period of time we exchange a series of less than polite challenges about our ideas on this issue. I call for a public debate on the issues. You ignore the call. In an effort to smoke you out I write a post that appears on a national blog. In this blog I paint a less than favorable portrait of your work and character. A writer for a major metropolitan newspaper reads the post and writes an article saying you are not what you appear to be, wrongly citing my post as evidence of what he labels your ineptitude. Now the readership of that paper thinks we are both less capable than we are and 95 percent of them do not know either of us. How did we end up here?

I would attribute a significant portion of the problem to a decline of civility in our communication. What are the factors in this generic example that contribute to the decline of civility?

At least three apparent factors influence this decline of civility. One factor is communicating via electronic means of communication make it easier to view our partner in conversation as an object. How does this happen? Using an electronic device to communicate removes the other person from our presence (even though we are sometimes physically present in the same space when we do so). The device we are using to communicate takes the place of the person we are communicating with at the moment. Since the device is an object we begin to see and treat the person like an object rather than as another person to be loved and treated as we treat ourselves. This is obviously an overly simplistic explanation of a complex process but it makes the point.

The second factor contributing to a decrease in civility in this age of electronic communication is it leads us to make more attributions about the other person involved in the conversation. Since we do not share physical presence with the other person we begin to take shortcuts in our communication. These shortcuts lead to assumptions which lead to errors in attribution. As a result we often infer differences that do not exist or miss differences that do exist. This can lead to less civil behavior toward our conversation partner.

A third reason is that many conversations that would once have been private or had limited audiences now have the potential to have audiences in the hundreds, thousands, or even millions. In some cases it is difficult to determine where to draw the line between private and public conversation. If the person beside you in the airport is having a conversation with her spouse is that a private conversation or a public one? If leading scholars on opposite sides of an issue let their personal vendettas appear in their blogs, which are posted for anyone with access to a

computer to see, is that a private or a public matter? The situations and potential ramifications are endless.

Suggestion

Finally let's consider a suggestion. The suggestion is threefold.

First communicate in a wholesome manner. How do we do that? Communicate in a manner that fills our messages with grace and truth as Jesus did. This will obviously pose challenges for us since we are not full of grace and truth as He was. Jesus was both messenger and message. We cannot be the message embodied as He was.

We need to communicate Shalom. What is shalom? The broader Hebraic meaning of shalom is peace in community. Community is built through communication. In order to build community effectively our communication must be filled with grace and truth. That kind of communication requires a relationship with the one who came from the Father. Having a relationship with the ultimate communicator does not guarantee all our communication will be filled with grace and truth.

We should endeavor to send messages in a manner that invites others to receive them and receive messages in a manner that invites others to send them. Since as the old adage states we can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar I believe speaking the truth in love requires an irenic spirit.

Second, communicate in a manner that helps others grow in a way that meets their needs. If we look to meet the needs of others in conversation it will be difficult to see them as an object rather than one to be valued as we value ourselves. It will also be difficult to reach the point where the primary goal of the conversation is to be the victor in any conflict that arises.

Third, do all this in a manner so that those who might hear our conversation whether private or public might be enriched as the result of hearing. When conversations are public – whether they were intended to be private or not – our obligation for the impact of our conversation extends beyond those who are directly involved.

If this threefold suggestion sounds familiar, there is good reason. It is scriptural. It comes from the words of Paul to the church at Ephesus. If we can put into practice this threefold suggestion we will take a major step toward restoring civility in our communication and improve our chances of speaking the truth in love.

Conclusion

Where do we go from here? I would suggest we continue to develop our understanding of communication and conflict, find new questions that aid us in finding ways to speak the truth in

love, carefully examine the examples of communication and conflict we encounter each day, and implement tactics that lead to more Christ-like communication.

This is only a beginning to the conversation. What kind of persons have we become?