



Sidney Hormell
1420 Santo Domingo Ave. # 40
Duarte, CA 91010

RECONCILIATION AND COMMUNICATION

The Rev. Sidney Hormell, Ph.D.

(Sid Hormell, now retired, received his Ph.D. in communication from the University of Illinois. He taught at Hartford Seminary Foundation, Tainan Theological College(Taiwan ROC) and the University of Hawaii .He published readings in religion and communication in Chinese, and was pastor to a number of churches).

Some 30 years ago Marshall McLuhan and many social commentators were prophesying the coming of a "Global Village" knit together in electronic networks like the nervous system of a great organism. We are now in it and becoming aware of communication problems and possibilities, as never before.

As rapidly advancing technology takes us deeper into the Age of Communication (Information), communication lines are being extended to link every point of the globe. However, as a consequence of this adventure into One World, racial, political, cultural, tribal and religious tensions are increasing and more information is being accumulated than any generation can hope to fully comprehend. Of course, computer technologies have arrived to help us to try to control that data. In theology, philosophy, sciences and arts, there is much fragmentation, as individual specialists become divorced and segregated from one other. In everyday life individuals are complaining more and more about being isolated. There is a breakdown in community. One distinguishing feature of today's mass society has become the atomization of the person.

The reconciliation of fragmented intellectual thought has become a dominant problem, and the reconciliation of fragmented mental, emotional, and social life has become a dominant health problem. With vivid awareness of a broken world, and in a time when the whole globe faces terrorism, political and religious leaders are attempting to set up structures for international cooperation. Reconciliation has become such a dominant theme of some churches that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) took II Corinthians 5:18 as the basis for a new creed in 1967 ("All this is from God, who through

Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”)

A science of communication has developed over the past 50 years and has drawn together philosophers, scientists, artists and communication specialists and researchers to the study of interpersonal, mass media, computer and telecommunication. To be in the forefront of intellectual developments today, the church needs to understand communication theory and its relationship to theology and the physical and social sciences. But there is very little of this study going on, even in theological seminaries. This article is an attempt to raise the interest of theological speculators in this topic, and an argument for its importance for theology and the church. Major concepts in what follows are taken from Process Theology, as I work to understand it. I have selected a few works which have become “classics” in their fields of study. (See the final page for notes on them.) Hopefully the reader will catch a vision of the whole, and see how communication fits into a total theological and cosmological scheme.

“Communication,” said psychiatrist Jurgen Ruesch, “is the only scientific model which enables us to explain physical, intra personal, interpersonal and cultural aspects of events within one system....The concept of communication would include all of those processes by which people influence one another. Though we shall later be more limited in our definition of communication, various theories imply that communication has to do with the organization of behavior.

Cybernetics, born out of a desire for unification, concerns itself with control systems, whether they be mechanical or social. The father of this field, Norbert Wiener, classed communication and control together. “When I control the actions of another person,” he said, “I communicate a message to him....Further....I must take cognizance of any messages from him.”

The process of communication demands that each communicator adapt his behavior in some degree to the expectations of the other. Behavior (speaking, acting, etc.) takes on an element of commonness or sharing and we can speak of it as being “organized.” Organization implies the balancing of disruptive and conflicting elements within a situation. Such a goal is seen in cosmological dimensions by Alfred North Whitehead in his aesthetic demand for “balanced complexity” in the Universe and by Paul Tillich in his

soteriological demand for the balance of what he calls the “ontological polarities in essential being.

Where thinkers today are trying to regain, as Whitehead put it, a “vision of the whole,” adherents of cybernetics, process and existentialist theology take a similar perspective on basic questions of existence. Even though Wiener, Whitehead and Tillich certainly do not agree on all topics, their views on the matter of organization and communication are strikingly similar.

Let us turn, first of all, to contemporary physics. Developments in this field have led many scientists to a process view of reality and a systems analysis of physical and social phenomena. In contrast to Newtonian physics, quantum theory maintains that atomic entities have a periodic or rhythmic rather than a continuously enduring character. Relativity theory emphasizes the physical “field” which defines the physically real not as particles at a point in empty space, but as vectors of lines of force within a field. In other words, the physics of isolated particles located at a point has been replaced by a physics of general interconnectedness. We are in the period of a physics of events rather than a physics of objects.

In simple terms, the physical universe can be seen to be made up of energy pulsations so interconnected at various levels and stages in fields of force that rocks, trees and people take shape. This pulsating, flowing, dynamic universe is analogous to the dynamic growth of a biological organism.

This new picture of the universe has led to a systems approach to the sciences and the arts. The “event” is the unit of things real. In other words, an individual thing must be viewed always in its relationship to other things within its field. A “system” is a set of relationships that bind objects into a regular unity. A cell or stone may be viewed as a system of interconnected molecules in the process of growth or decay. A human being may be viewed as a system of interconnected organs in the process of growth or decay. A human society may be viewed as a system of interconnected persons in the process of growth or decay. As we move up the scale of size and complexity, we may view the solar system, or a stellar galaxy, or, indeed, the entire universe as a system with larger units making it up. “System” is preeminently a name for order. The opposite would be random variability, disorganized

complexity, or in more common terms, chaos.

Scientists can focus their attention upon what is going on within a system proper, or upon the system's relationship within its environment. For instance, if you wish to study the human being as a system, you can study either the ordered relationship internal to the individual (nerves, organs, etc.) or the ordered relationships the individual has with his physical and social environment. Microbiology studies the human at the level of cells, physiology at the level of organs, geography at the level of physical environment, psychology and sociology at the level of social environment.

Process philosophy and theology sees every rhythmic event of the universe as appropriating (taking into itself), if only to an infinitesimal degree, elements of its environment. In this sense Whitehead could speak of even a tree receiving experience from and "feeling" its environment or field. However, when Whitehead left the level of life and examined inorganic matter he admitted that some systems appear to be sealed off from their environment (e.g. a rock) and are not capable of growth, but only decay.

A closed system is one which is sealed off from or impenetrable by the field or environment which surrounds it. An open system, on the other hand, is one which is in constant interchange with an environment, subject to influences originating outside the system. Such a system is not passive, but active. It is a goal-seeking organization. In simple terms, we can think of a rock as an example of a closed system and a human being as an example of an open system.

To the whole set of problems centering about communication and systems control, Wiener gave the name "cybernetics," a name which comes from the Greek word for steersman (*kubernetes*). He based his work on probability theory, which has today become the basis of statistical studies. The great pioneers of twentieth century physics like Gibbs, Heisenberg, Einstein and Planck rejected the rigid deterministic world of Newton with its absolute laws, and presented us with a fluid, contingent world. It is a probabilistic world where chance is admitted. Science no longer claims to deal with what will always happen, but rather with what will happen with an overwhelming probability.

The recognition of an element of incomplete determinism, almost an

irrationality in the world, is in a certain way parallel to Freud's admission of a deep irrational component in human conduct and thought.

The proponents of probability theory, Wiener argued, are close to the tradition of St. Augustine. For this random element, this organic incompleteness, is one which without too violent a figure of speech we may consider evil, the negative evil which St. Augustine characterizes as incompleteness. In contrast to Einstein, who like Newton still looked for some all-embracing rational design in some "eternal ground," Wiener (as do many scientists today) stressed the probabilistic nature of the universe. Probability, he argued, tends naturally to increase as the universe grows older. The measure of this probability is called "entropy." The characteristic tendency of entropy is to increase. As entropy increases, Wiener said, "the universe and all closed systems in the universe, tend naturally to deteriorate and lose their distinctiveness, to whom from the least to the most probable state, from a state of organization and differentiation in which distinctions and forms exist, to a state of chaos and sameness."

Lincoln Barnett stated that "the universe is thus progressing toward an ultimate 'heat death,' or as it is technically defined, a condition of 'maximum entropy'."

This is viewing the universe as a closed system. But, while the universe as a whole tends to run down, according to Wiener, there are local enclaves, whose direction seems opposed to that of the universe at large, and in which there is a limited and temporary tendency for organization to increase. Life finds its home in some of these enclaves. In control and communication, we are fighting nature's tendency to degrade the organized and to destroy the meaningful, the tendency for entropy to increase.

When an organism behaves in some way, its environment will respond in some way. The information an organism receives about the response of the environment is called "feedback." Feedback enables the organism to change and adjust. In other words, to live effectively is to live with adequate information.

With information an organism or system can grow in a unified manner. Without information, it will tend to decay and move toward disorganization. When we see an organism in a dynamic, open, interconnected relationship

with its environment, we can speak of the existence of the process of communication.

Even though the abstract principles for the process of communication apply to any organization or system, we usually reserve the term “communication” for human beings. Ruesch, speaking of the feedback mechanism, maintained that the field of communication is concerned with human relatedness. “A social situation is established when people have entered into communication; the state is determined by the fact that a person perceives that his perception has been noted by others. As soon as this fact has been established.....communication can be said to exist.”

This healthy state is called “dialogue.” Following the thinking of Martin Buber, many social scientists, psychiatrists, and philosophers consider this the ideal state of human affairs, and look for it even in relationships beyond the human.

What if the universe itself, as well as living organisms, was an open system? It is as reasonable to take a theistic position as it is to take an atheistic position. (This is not to say that empirical research can prove or disprove any metaphysical position. It cannot, because metaphysical positions must be taken prior to scientific investigation and not after. But when scientists build their theories about the ultimate nature of the universe, it is reasonable and important to speak from a theistic faith.

Thus, we could postulate the existence of a force which gives pattern and direction to material phenomena and moves the universe or part of it (say, human beings) permanently away from chaos and toward order and harmony. In a dialogue relationship with the universe, a creative power could be moving it or part of it from meaninglessness, and, in biblical terms, “saving the world.”

(Although we cannot deal with him in this brief article, one is certainly reminded of the monumental work of Teilhard de Chardin. In his evolutionary scheme, Teilhard saw the process of “divergence” being halted and the process of “convergence” begun by persons in his development of the “noosphere” or arena of the interchange of thought and ideas. He saw not only the existence of a pattern of energy holding the universe together, which he called “tangential energy,” but also the existence of an energy working

from “above,” called “radial energy,” drawing everything forward to a greater complexity and finally converging toward an “Omega Point”, which he considered to be Jesus Christ, the hyper personal center.)

St. Paul disclosed God’s purpose in Eph. 1:10: “As a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth.”

In philosophizing or theologizing about the kind or universe modern science is revealing to us, some thinkers are turning in one way or another to the classical cosmology of Plato. Plato proposed that, through the agency of a divine artisan, ideal forms or patterns enter into the material world. Eternal ideas take root in material, temporal processes, giving them direction.

Whitehead put modern dress on Plato’s ideas and called them “eternal objects,” arguing, “The things which are temporal arise by their participation in the things which are eternal.” Tillich uses language that is thoroughly Platonic in spirit and intention, and it could be said that whereas Neoplatonism put the Source of purpose one step “above” the material world, Tillich puts it one step “below,” in the “depths.”

G.T.Guilbaud, a French cyberneticist, tried to relate the notion of feedback to Platonic thought. “A little reflection,” he said, “shows that all goal-directed organization demands closed-circuits (feedback loops). He concluded, “The actual world of individuals with its horizontal stratum of communication is regulated by an ideal world of essences and ideas in which individual human beings participate, and which informs them and controls their actions. Even the interconnections and information exchanged between person and person are only conceived of as regulated by vertical participation in the world of ideas.

Even though some of the more mechanistically inclined cyberneticists and communication scientists would not talk about an eternal realm of ideas, but once the system approach is taken, one can easily begin to talk about values.

Returning to the notion of entropy, Ruesch stated:”In the seeking of values it is clear that what happens is that a person sets out to ‘trick’ the second law of thermodynamics. He endeavors to interfere with the ‘natural’ or random course of events, so that some otherwise improbable outcome will be achieved....Briefly, in value seeking (a person) is achieving coincidence or

congruence between something in his head, an idea of what breakfast should be....and something external, an actual arrangement of eggs and bacon. The person achieves this coincidence by altering the external world; but now he attempts to do this by altering what is in his head...The person is trying to establish an otherwise improbable congruence between ideas and events.”

We can discuss this matter of eternal ideas in a more respectable, scientifically verifiable way by referring to values and myth systems.

Every finite system is a member of a larger one and encompasses smaller ones. One of the fathers of system theory, the biologist L. Von Bertalanffy, said that in every system forces of a higher order are potentially present. A “culture” (such a higher order) is a sensitized net, a way of viewing and organizing reality, which can be learned, taught, and transmitted. It will not change potentialities inherent in sensory experience, of course, but will change “apperception”(which features of experience are focused upon.) Assumptions about the nature of social and physical reality become a prior constituents in the perceptual process. Simply put, a philosophy of life gives some sense of coherence or unity both to cognitive and effective (thinking and action) dimensions of experience.

Values are ordered relationships; they are statements of order. Values enter into life through perception and cognition and are the primary determinants of individual behavior. Because they are ordered relationships arranged in patterns, they form a system(are not random). The dominant sets of values arranged in patterns can be called a “myth system.” Since values turn the flux of sensations of the primitive existential world into a structured, ordered environment where patterned thought and behavior are possible, every society is held together by some myth system. Tillich would call the ultimate or focal values the “soul” of a culture which finds expression in the culture’s concepts, works of art, legal forms. The function of a myth system is the provision of a common set of value orientations which will facilitate social action.

One communication scientist, James Carey, argues “The most primitive of religions and sophisticated of modern philosophies reflect attempts by (humans) to give their lives meaning and direction by grounding them in myth systems which will order experience.” He also argues that since the essential

function of a myth system is to provide members of a group or society with shared definitions of the situation, this sharing is the essence of communication. In the communication process, values enter the human situation to unite and integrate human beings. The great sociologist, Talcott Parsons, said that communication always implies a common culture. It can be said, in this sense, that culture is communication.

There are two aspects of growth tending to be common to all systems: differentiation and integration. Differentiation means that the system moves, as a function of time from complete wholeness to subordinate partial systems. There is decay, the loss of original identity. (Recall our earlier discussion of the breaking up or disintegration of a system in its natural movement toward entropy.) Integration means that the units are brought together in some manner by strengthening existing relationships between the processes of differentiation and integration.

As a system grows, its increasing differentiation demands the constant reintegration of its parts, so that in order to maintain balance and identity its organization becomes increasingly complex. Whitehead saw an aim toward order in the universe and called it "balanced complexity." Balanced complexity means that an individual or society takes into its self the widest variety of experiences, but does so in a manner in which the contrasts are complementary and not mutually inhibiting. In other words, growth and creativity, the integration which seems to be the aim of the Author of the universe, can be said to be unity in diversity.

Where human beings are concerned, the basic unity is achieved by the sharing of values (in myth systems), and the essential process of this sharing is communication.

We are engaged in a cosmic drama in which creativity is at war against destruction, growth against decay, organization against disorder, integration against disintegration.

Now let us put all of this into terms familiar to Christian theology. Salvation in Christian doctrine has to do with wholeness or health: the balanced integration of man with himself (healthy personality), man with man (healthy society), and man with God. But this integration is spoken of as reconciliation, implying that man has fallen from this ideal (original state) and

must be returned to it by God's gracious act (in Jesus Christ).

The myth of the fall maintains that in its true and undistorted nature, humanity would be in an estranged state. We are in a state of separation from that to which we belong (self, world, God). And this condition is called sin. (Finding confirmation for their views in modern psychoanalysis and depth psychology, Tillich, and other existentialists described this state as discuss here.

According to Tillich, the estranged state contains within itself "structures of destruction which aim at chaos". These structures constitute what is commonly called evil. Many scientists and philosophers accept this evil ("maximum entropy" in scientific terms, "nonbeing" or "meaninglessness" in existentialist terms) as ultimately victorious. They take a stoic pose, accepting ultimate meaninglessness or death for the universe and living "in spite of it." However, the Christian scientist, philosopher or theologian lives, rooted in the faith of an ultimate meaning and purpose. It is a faith that God's purpose of creation will ultimately triumph. A broken, separated world will be reconciled; death will be swallowed up in victory.

Just as the implications of a growing, dynamic, open universe have forced thinkers to reexamine Platonic thought, the implications have also pushed today's thinkers beyond classic metaphysics toward the development of a new kind of world view. Classical metaphysics tended to separate an ideal, changeless world of ideas from the real world of changing, physical givenness. The relation between these two worlds was one-way, with the eternal realm infecting and moving the temporal, but not vice versa. God was seen to be unchanging and unchangeable and ultimately impersonal, even though theologians throughout Christian history have tried to solve this problem. Today there seems to be a growing rejection of such a traditional view and an emphasis on the biblical picture of a God personally involved in this world.

God moves from within and is in everything and everything is in God. A universe tied together by communicative relationships, a universe which can grow in a creative unity only by way of a communicative relationship with a directing agency, implies a very personal God. To say that the ultimate Source or Ground of the universe is involved in the give-and-take

of the communication process is to say that God is intimately involved and related to God's creatures, personally. Our God is a God who even sacrifices God's-self in order to reestablish the lines of communication broken by the destructive structures of evil. We know that self-sacrifice is involved whenever one person enters into an open dialogue relationship with another person. God is a God who is ultimately powerful over sin and evil, but none-the-less a god vitally involved in dialogue. Along with other forms of communication like dreams, meditation, and contemplation, we can actually talk to God. This is prayer and why it is effective. Metaphorically speaking, God is the "Great Communicator" and Jesus Christ is the Great Communicator in the flesh.

The clue to discerning God's nature (which we have in Jesus Christ) is that the very principle of all existence is love, in the sense of the mutual giving and receiving whereby each of us becomes himself only in interdependence with his fellows. As Schubert Ogden argued, in the new metaphysics demanded by today's advancing knowledge, "God is without quibble or qualification a genuinely personal being."

Even though there is indication that the entire physical universe is involved in creation, destruction, and salvation, the Bible seems to emphasize the uniqueness of the human being as a central character in this cosmic drama. It is the human who is made in God's image, and even this expression has its parallel in scientific description and its relationship to the communication process. Science is revealing that the human's main distinctiveness from lower orders of creation is our ability to use symbols. The human is the language animal, the communicator par excellence. This power given us by God enables us to act upon ourselves, the world and our maker in creative and destructive ways. The ability to manipulate symbols means that we can communicate with ourselves (is conscious, self-transcendent, can evaluate our own behavior), with others and with God.

But in our present state of sin we are unable to have perfect communication (commonness, community, communion.) and God takes the initiative in reestablishing the process.

As one would expect, there are direct and indirect references to communication throughout the Bible, but the great biblical myth of the

communication breakdown is found in the story of the building of the Tower of Babel, and the resulting confusion of languages (Gen. 11:1-9) Today, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, we are faced with a Babylonian confusion which fragments us. The appearance of the state of communication regained (the kingdom of God), is symbolized by the story of Pentecost, when people divorced from one another by diverse languages find that they can share, communicate, and are reconciled (Acts 2:1-13).

Whether one stresses commonness as the outcome or as the precondition of the communication process, as we have said in various ways above, communication has to do with the establishment of a consensus, the stabilization and institutionalization of a common definition of the situation, and is a means of promoting ongoing systems of human interaction. If we regard communication as social process, we look for its function in the integration of behavior.

Communication starts from the basis of common values and habits and explores areas where the relationship can be extended. For example, in order to talk to someone you obviously need to share a particular language. If the other person responds positively to your words, you are likely to reveal more about yourself and attempt to learn more about the other, and extend the relationship to other behaviors.

According to II Cor. 5:18, the Christian's ministry is that of reconciliation. This means that we are to be communicators in the truest sense of the word. Through communication, a differentiated, fragmented world is to be brought back together. However, even though it is the task of every Christian to understand communication and to communicate, there are and should be specialists in the church, and related to the church, who are called to and occupy the role of communicator. Such professionals in the field should know theology and ethics as they strive to be responsible communicators. Communication technology is changing and progressing so rapidly that, today, every society or organization of some size must recruit and train men and women who know the latest communication techniques. From mass media to personal computers to e-mail to cell phone to cable to satellite to cyberspace and, just around the corner, 3-D, various methods are used to draw us into a "global village," for good or ill.

Let us take a brief look at one more theological concept and relate it to communication: Forgiveness. Probably the greatest cause of blocked communication channels is the inability of persons to confess their faults and seek reconciliation. The unforgiving or unforgiven put up road blocks to mutual understanding. But the forgiving or forgiven can engage in dialogue and practice empathy and other communication principles. It opens the social system. Related to this is the necessity to deal with conflict management. With its communication techniques, it, too, can bring reconciliation.

Ethics: Let me add some questions of right or wrong as they apply more specifically to communication. How free should the press be? How free should individuals be to express themselves? A society can face overload or underload of information. How can we help minority cultures to not destroy their dying societies and to achieve balance and justice? (An example of a closed system would be the efforts of the Taliban government of Afghanistan's efforts to close the country to the outside world, even outlawing the watching of television.) As some sociologists point out, no nation, it seems, can keep out communication technology for long. Who will have the power to control our most important resource: information? How can we help the marginal minorities to have equal rights to it? How can we protect people from the invasion of privacy? How can we put away judgementalism, dogmatism, and intolerance in our various modes of communication? These questions apply not only to nations, but also the home, or almost any institution.

This article is an attempt to show how communication fits into a total theological and cosmological scheme, and how it is central to God's aim in creation, and how the church can be involved. In this new Information Age, information is power and justice has to do with the equal opportunity to communicate. Of course, there are a multitude of problems, challenges, and opportunities in the area of interpersonal communication, that subject which needs great study and receives little. It is imperative that Christians, especially professional communicators, understand their central role in the reconciliation process. The whole area of paranormal communication calls for serious study. Communication is so all pervasive that we take it for

granted, especially in regard to paranormal channels.

We have attempted to explore the extremely complex thought of Wiener, Whitehead, Tillich and others who have tried to achieve some synthesis in this bewildering Communication Age. In constructing a temporary "vision of the whole," we started by raising philosophical implications of contemporary physics, and the new picture of the universe it proposes. We defined communication as sharing a commonness. I argued that the solution to today's fragmentation and segregation lies in the direction of reconciliation and integration. I spoke about communication's role in the control and organization of behavior, and about the science of cybernetics. Then we looked at general systems theory and examined the concept, looking at open and closed systems. We identified parallels between scientific and theological speculation. Nature's tendency to move toward disintegration and meaninglessness (entropy) was seen to be countered by life and information (ideally represented in the human) where integration moves the universe toward unity. Since a dialogue relationship was seen as the necessary integrating factor, the kind of God we postulated as the eventual victor over meaninglessness (evil) must be very personal. We then saw how the human, out of all creation, is the communicator par excellence. Since we are in a state of distorted communication (sin), this personal God takes the initiative in reestablishing it (kingdom of God). We cooperate, through humility and forgiveness in becoming open systems. Then we sought a description of God, according to communications. Then we looked to the Bible and two key stories. Finally, we mentioned Ethics and applied the theories above to an understanding of what's going on in the world today; the social issues and crucial technologies. The essence of communication is sharing or love (communion of persons with God, others, and themselves), and is thus the means and the end of the gospel of reconciliation.

NOTES

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