

“Fullness in Communication”

Colossians 4:2-6 (NRSV)

For me, one of the most beautiful sections in all of Scripture is the apostle John’s identification of **Jesus Christ as the “Word.”** John begins his Gospel by saying, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1). As part of God’s Holy Triune Self, **Jesus Christ was, is and will be God’s ultimate communication about God to humankind.** “He was in the beginning with God” (Jn. 1:2). Before there was time, before creation itself, before the sun, planets and stars were set in their places in space, before there was dry land, water and fire, before there was day or night, before “all creatures great and small” inhabited this lovely, fragile planet earth, God had determined to communicate with us, in and through his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. I suppose you could translate the opening words of John’s Gospel in this way, “In the beginning was the logos, the Word, the revelation of God’s ultimate rationale and purpose for human beings, God’s ultimate communication to us.”

John went on to say,

Everything was created through him;
nothing – not one thing! –
came into being without him.
What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness,
the darkness couldn’t put it out.

The Life-Light was the real thing:
every person entering Life
he brings into Light
(Eugene Peterson, The Message, John 1:3-5, 9).

Further, John concludes, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14a). When Jesus Christ did this, he became the ABC of God to us, the alphabet of Deity. “And we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14b). Because Jesus Christ is the Word, we understand something of how much we have always been loved. In his incarnation, Jesus Christ exemplified “grace and truth.” **What John means is this: in Jesus Christ God has spelled his love out for us!**

Seeing God has communicated himself to us in all his fullness in Christ (Col. 2:9), this next section of Paul's letter to the Colossians calls us to fullness in communication with God, and to fullness in communication with others in this world. Since Jesus Christ is the fullness of God's expression of himself in the universe, and we have been made partakers of his fullness, our fullness should flow back up to him and outwards to the world.

1. **Fullness in communication with God** (Col. 4:2).

“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving” (4:2). At its most basic, **prayer is communication with God**. We keep in touch with God through prayer.

The idea here is also to **“devote” oneself to prayer, to persist in it, “keeping alert through thanksgiving”** – steadfastly keeping on in communicating with God in a spirit of thanksgiving, even though one's prayers are not immediately answered. Easier said than done. Elsewhere, our Lord tried to encourage us by telling his audience the story of a widow who got her way with a godless, uncaring judge because she nagged him. It was “a parable,” reports Luke, “about [people's] need to pray always and not to lose heart” (18:1). If only our courts of appeal would work that way! I can think of at least one case reported in this last week's newspaper that would profit from the success of that kind of appeal (“Confidence in legal system shaken,” The Vancouver Sun, Wed., Jun. 2/10, p. A10).

Such **continual, faithful prayer, in spite of adverse circumstances**, was the abiding experience of the apostolic church (Acts 1:14; 2:42). The apostles were constantly encouraging this kind of prayer, as Paul did, for example, when he challenged the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:17-18) – full, continual, thankful communication with God is the way to go.

How is this possible? **Are we always to be carrying on some constant verbal dialogue with God, whatever we are doing?** I don't think so! They have places for people who do this, and the doors lock from the outside. There cannot be unbroken verbal communication with God, much less with others, otherwise we would never be really “there” for anyone we are trying to speak to or anything we need to do. Even Jesus, while here on earth, was well aware of the problem of “vain repetition” (Matt. 6:7, KJV).

Perhaps **this continual prayer is not so much a speaking of words as a posture of the heart.** The Quaker Christian, **Thomas Kelly** once said in his Testament of Devotion (1931):

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we can be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings (p. 35).

The delightful medieval monk, **Brother Lawrence**, having completely absorbed the Benedictine Rule that worship and work (*orare est laborare*) are one, wrote in what was to become his classic book, The Practice of the Presence of God:

The time of business does not differ with me from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were on my knees (1958, p. 30-31).

Full devotion to prayer is possible in a busy life.

Note Paul also suggests that as one prays, **one might also consider “keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.”** Being devoted to prayer doesn’t mean the mind must go into devotional neutral while an easy “stream of consciousness” flows between the person who prays and God. Rather, a habit of prayer demands **mental “alertness”** to the challenges and dangers of life and the needs of those around us, an alert awareness that will, at any moment necessary, launch us into fervent prayer. Paul’s parallel challenge in his Letter to the Ephesians says: “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints” (6:18). All of this is part of a full communication with God.

This prayerful devotion is not only vigilant, but also positive because it is carried out “with thanksgiving.” In spite of troubles, which will always come, it remembers God’s goodness.

Joshua, Israel's ancient leader, returned to Gilgal to gaze upon "the stones of remembrance" – the stones that were taken from the Jordan River when God held back the waters so Israel could cross over safely into the Promised Land. We are told, it refreshed him and his heart rejoiced in thanksgiving (Josh. 4). Likewise, we also are encouraged to recall our own "stones of remembrance" and to give thanks in our constant communication with God.

Is your communication with God rich and full? If not, it is because you are not appropriating his fullness (see Col. 2:9-10). If your life seems to fall short, dip your cup into the water of his fullness now. For, as John Gospel declares, "From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (Jn. 1:16). And when your heart and mine is overflowing with God's grace, it will flow back up to God and out to others, in deep, alert, thankful and meaningful communication.

2. **Fullness in communication with the world** (Col. 4:3-6).

Paul asked first, for fullness in his own communication with the world:

At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should (4:3-4).

Paul didn't seem to care whether he was in prison or not – that's how he dealt with his troubles -- **he just wanted more opportunities to communicate the Good News.** It was preaching that got him into prison and would likely keep him in prison, but that was okay as long as he could tell the story over and over again to anyone who wanted to listen – and we know that he did! Paul burned to communicate the gospel. In his Letter to the Corinthians he wrote, "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has been opened to me, [even though] there are many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:8-9). Paul's desire for opportunities to communicate with others about the most essential things in life and death is a model to us.

In addition, **Paul wanted to communicate the gospel "clearly."**

Unfortunately, this is not always the outcome for every preacher, as we often hear of a mist in the pulpit and a fog in the pew." **R. C. Sproul**, who is, in fact a fine American Presbyterian preacher, once said ironically, pointing out the problem of certain high and mighty preachers, "I use big words to

disguise my ignorance. Big words are great for that. If I can use a word that nobody understands, chances are that people will think that I at least understand what I am talking about even if they don't" (The Holiness of God, 1985, p. 54). **C. S. Lewis**, the brilliant Oxford English professor agreed: "Any fool can write learned language. Then vernacular is the real test. If you can't turn your faith into [simple language], then you either don't understand it or you don't believe it." **Charles Spurgeon**, one of the greatest preachers of all time, commented, "Christ said, 'Feed my sheep'... 'Feed my lambs.' Some preachers, however, put the food so high that neither sheep nor lambs can reach it. They seem to have read the text [as], 'Feed my giraffes'" (quoted by John R. W. Stott, Between Two Worlds, 1982, p. 128).

Joe Bayly, in his book I Love to Tell the Story (1978), commented:

Someone passed the following quotation on to me, from a graffiti wall at St. John's University in Minnesota: "Jesus said to them, 'Who do you say that I am?' And they replied, 'You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma in which we find the ultimate meaning of our interpersonal relationships.' And Jesus said, 'What?' I like that. I like it because it sets the simplicity of our Lord's words and teaching over against the complexity of some technically correct theological expressions of the truth. Not that theology is wrong. We need deep thinkers who can explain ... our faith. But such complexity of ideas belongs in a seminary classroom, not on the hillside where Jesus taught the multitudes, or in the room where I teach my Sunday School class. Jesus was profound but simple in expression, To use an old, but true, way of expressing it, 'He put the cookies – or the bread of life – on the lowest shelf, where anybody [can] reach it. And so must I. I cannot show off my knowledge (the little that I have) or my [superior] vocabulary, and still teach as Jesus taught. Nor get through to people as he got through to them.

Amen! In saying to the Colossians, "Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should" Paul acknowledged that prayer makes all the difference in communicating the gospel. Prayer puts God in his place and prayer puts us in our place.

There is a great story that comes from the life of the famous missionary, **Hudson Taylor**, of the China Inland Mission who once said wisely, “God’s work done in God’s way never lacks God’s supply.” There was a particular mission station in China that was greatly blessed, far above the others, in souls won for the Lord. There seemed to be no accounting for this, because others were equal in devotion and ability. When Hudson Taylor was speaking on deputation in England, he met a man who began asking him about the success of that particular mission station. Taylor asked a number of questions in return. It turned out that the man had been the college roommate of the missionary in that station many years earlier and, unbeknown to his colleague, he had committed himself to pray daily for the success of his friend’s work. Hudson Taylor told the man, “Now I know the answer to people’s questions about the success of that work.”

In conclusion, **Paul goes on to express his concern for the Colossians’ witness:**

Conduct yourselves wisely towards outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone (4:5-6).

Grace in their speech presupposed grace in their hearts, “for out of the abundance [or the overflow] of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). This gracious conversation is never tiresome, insipid or boring. In fact, it is “seasoned with salt”; it is interesting and scintillating; it is savoury and tasty. It is something to be anticipated, as one looks forward to a pleasant evening conversation over a meal, with some wine, with friends. It is thoughtful speech, communication with content. It is joyful, even witty, conversation for this is what “salty speech” meant in classical Greek. **Charles Spurgeon**, who (as I’ve already mentioned) was one of the world’s greatest gospel communicators, was once criticized by a woman who thought he was too witty. Spurgeon replied, “Madam, if you knew what I didn’t say, you wouldn’t say that!” Believers and the shared gospel of their Lord are to be interesting. Their remarks are to be contextualized; that is, they are to speak to the people where they are, according to their situation, interests and needs.

Becky Pippert, who wrote a very interesting book about evangelism entitled Out of the Saltshaker, and whose husband served as the UPI Bureau Chief in the Middle East, wrote,

Recently at a party, I was introduced by a very staid diplomat with: “This is Becky and she really believes ... and she’s so interesting!” Wes and I have laughed many times over how people have introduced us with great enthusiasm, fascination and respect. This comes out of the context of our efforts to genuinely get to know ... people and their interests. We go to concerts, see films together and out of scores of conversations, our Christian beliefs [and values] have emerged. We don’t do this as a gimmick to slip in the gospel. We do it because we are genuinely interested in relating to non-believers and their world views (Tabletalk, Vol. 10, No. 4, Aug. 1986, p. 7).

This is full communication with others, “making the most of the time” or opportunity.

Jesus Christ was and is still the ultimate Word, suitable for any occasion. Our best response to him is to let his communication within us overflow into good communication, filled with grace and appropriate seasoning, as we converse with others.

Amen

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