
Christian Communication

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If I had to identify the most frequently encountered problem in counseling fellow believers, it would be easy: unbiblical communication patterns. If people fail to express themselves clearly (or at all), or if they fail to listen attentively, relationships flounder. Unbiblical communication results in hurt, anger, ignorance, and disunity within the body of Christ. In marriages, unbiblical communication is a wedge used by Satan to disrupt the one-flesh relationship husbands and wives should be developing. That, in turn, threatens the testimony of the church in the world. Indeed, the consequences of not conforming our communication habits to the Scriptures have far-reaching and profound implications!

How would you rate yourself as a communicator? Do you self-consciously try to communicate according to biblical guidelines? What do your relationships reveal about your communication habits? Are your relationships stable and growing—or weak and stunted? For the sake of Christ's honor, you must not "fudge" on this issue. You must commit yourself to truly Christian communication.

Heart Attitudes

Principles for godly communication are found throughout the Scriptures. Foundational to all the rest are the *heart attitudes* of a godly communicator. By "heart attitude,"

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I mean the overall concerns that direct your communication choices. The way you communicate will reflect what you treasure in your heart (Matthew 6:21, 12:34-37).

Ephesians 4:1-6 cites several underlying concerns that should govern Christian communication within the body of Christ. Let's examine each in turn. As we do, ask yourself: *Do I have this concern in mind when I communicate with others?*

1. You must be concerned about setting a good example of Christ to others (v. 1): "live a life worthy of the calling you have received." If a professing believer is not primarily concerned about the honor of Christ's name, then more often than not his fleshly desires will find both verbal and behavioral expression in his life. That state of affairs, however, runs counter to a basic tenet of Christian living: the believer's life is not his own; it was bought at the price of his Savior's shed blood.

2. You must be concerned about being "completely humble" (v. 2). Biblically, "humility" can be defined as a willingness to sacrifice any of my desires that stand in the way of God's desires being fulfilled. Jesus' words are clear: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Luke 9:23). James insists that his readers repent of self-centered desires, thereby demonstrating the essence of humility (4:1-10). Unless a believer is willing to sacrifice his own interests so that Christ's kingdom purposes are furthered, his communication will be controlled by a self-centeredness that creates a chasm between himself and others.

3. You must be concerned about being “gentle” (v. 2). Gentleness is the opposite of being harsh, rude, or domineering. A gentle person tenderly watches out for others with whom he has contact, taking care not to insult, belittle, or demean them. When confronting sin in a fellow believer, the gentle Christian will be firm, but never attacking, in his approach.

4. You must be concerned about being “patient, bearing with one another in love” (v. 2). One of the characteristics of biblical love is a willingness to do good for others in spite of their shortcomings and sins.

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This forbearance in love was supremely exhibited by God’s plan of salvation: while we were still rebellious enemies, He sent His Son to die for us (Romans 5:6-11). In terms of communication, patience translates into not being curt, caustic, or cynical in speaking with others whose sins or foibles are evident. Patience with others grows in direct proportion to our awareness of how enticing habitual sin is for them.

5. You must be concerned about harmony in the church (vv. 3-6). “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” A godly communicator is one who sees harmony in the church as a primary concern of the Lord, as Paul did. A study of 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and Romans reinforces how important unity in the church is to God. Thus, it should be a concern of His children too. This is not to say that harmony is preserved at the expense of truth (Ephesians 4:15). But whenever possible, unity in the body of Christ must be sought, even at the expense of personal preferences, so that His kingdom purposes are furthered.

Are the concerns of your heart consistent with those Paul mentions? If so, they will not only transform the way you speak but the way you listen.

A Godly Listener

Proverbs 18:2 says, “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding, but delights in airing his own opinions.” This verse introduces us to a key character in Proverbs: the fool. The fool is the bad guy in Proverbs. He is irresponsible, often irrational, and careless (though he would say “carefree”). He is headstrong in his folly, yet blind to it as well. He wants to live life on his terms without much regard for God or others.

For the sake of convenience, I will assign the name

“Burt” to the fool of Proverbs. Burt’s folly pervades every area of his life, even the way he listens in conversations. Burt does not listen in order to understand others. If he shuts up at all in conversations, it is not because he “delights in understanding.” What he really delights in is hearing *himself* speak. His arrogance is obvious to everyone but himself.

To be an attentive listener, you must be humble. Do not demand or expect to be on center stage; do not call attention to yourself. Put the interests of others ahead of your own. Embrace Paul’s counsel to the Philippians: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourself...” (2:3).

Proverbs 18:13 says, “He who answers before listening—that is his folly and shame.” As a fool, Burt thinks he knows it all. He gets frustrated with those of us who are “less enlightened”—that’s why he is so quick to spout off. Proverbs warns, “he who speaks rashly comes to ruin” (13:3), but that does not faze Burt. In conversation with him you will probably hear yourself say, “I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.” That, of course, will throw Burt into a tailspin.

Even when Burt is not arguing, he does not know how to respond to you in a caring manner. In his eagerness to get on with *his* life, Burt will trivialize your trials with trite comments: “Well, that’s not really so bad. Things could be a lot worse, you know.” Such behavior is “shameful,” according to Proverbs 18:13, because it is self-centered and impatient.

How to Be an Attentive Listener

To be an attentive listener (unlike Burt), you must be patient. Take note of those situations in which you are likely to be impatient. For example, you might get impatient while listening because you are trying to accomplish too much at one time. To reduce that temptation when someone is speaking to you, remove yourself from enticing distractions. Do not attempt to do another task that requires concentration if you have indicated a willingness to listen to someone. Having stopped all other activity, maintain eye contact with the speaker. If you really cannot stop what you are doing, say so, but suggest a time to talk after you have finished with your project so that you can give your undivided attention to the speaker.

Proverbs 18:15 offers more counsel for godly listening: “The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out.” To be an attentive listener, you must *probe for accurate and adequate knowledge* of what the other person is trying to communicate.

Guard against “spacing out” while someone is speaking to you. I’m reminded of the farmer who said to his neighbor (Burt!), “My wife talks to herself a lot,” to which his neighbor replied: “So does my wife, but she doesn’t know it. She thinks I’m listening.” Such laziness is forcefully denounced in Proverbs.

To acquire accurate and adequate knowledge when someone is speaking to you, you should process two questions in your mind: (1) *Where is the speaker headed with his train of thought?* Follow the speaker’s reasoning as closely as possible—avoid wasting time passing judgment on his motives or thinking up your response. If the speaker uses any words that are unclear to you, ask him what he means. In fact, make a point to ask enough clarifying questions so that you can verbalize his train of thought in your own words. (2) *How does the speaker feel about what he is saying?* What emotional impact is the topic of conversation having on the speaker? If there is a motivational component to what is being said, consider what the person is trying to accomplish with his or her choice of words. This ultimately communicates a concern for the speaker’s interests.

Having considered the insights of these Proverbs, what kind of listener are you? Do you humbly put other people’s concerns above your own in conversations? Do you patiently attend to people who want to speak to you? Do you seek accurate and adequate knowledge of what others want to convey? Or like Burt, do you listen through the ears of a fool?

Four Rules of Verbal Communication

Once you have learned to listen, you have earned the right to speak. This brings us back to Ephesians 4, which sets out what might be called the four rules of verbal communication.

Our primary focus will be Ephesians 4:25-32, but it is important to understand the context in which Paul wanted those verses to be understood. In verses 17-24 Paul makes the following points: (1) Those to whom Paul is writing were once subject to evil desires because they had hearts that were hardened toward God. That resulted in impure lifestyles. (2) However, when they were exposed to the gospel of Christ, they were introduced to a radically different lifestyle—one that was conformed to “the truth that is in Jesus.” (3) Having accepted the gospel meant they had committed themselves to that radically different lifestyle. (4) Such a commitment, though, did not automatically erase their current lifestyles. Gradually they would have to “put off” their pagan lifestyle and “put on” an alternative lifestyle consistent with the gospel of Christ.

Having explained this, Paul gives several examples of this “put off/put on” dynamic in verses 25-32. Within this framework we find the four rules of verbal communication.

Falsehood vs. Truth

The first rule occurs in verse 25. The “put off” is *falsehood*. The “put on” is *speaking the truth*. This might sound easy, but in my counseling experience I am amazed at how often Christians are deceptive and seem unaware of it! Not only are they deceiving others, they also are deceiving themselves.

Perhaps you have witnessed “masked” deception in others or in yourself; that is, intentionally misrepresenting the truth because of a self-serving motive. In some cases the words you speak are not technically wrong, but your listener is led to believe something that serves your purposes, not the Lord’s. For example,

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have you ever *exaggerated* to make a point that your listener objected to? Usually that is done to win an argument so that you “come out on top.” Have you ever *changed the subject* of conversation to steer someone away from a topic you did not want to address, but which should be addressed? Have you ever *promised, but then not made the effort to keep your promise?* That, too, is deception. Have you ever avoided a conversation that made you uncomfortable by *creating a diversion or delay?* If so, you have deceived the other person. Unless Christians strenuously remove all such forms of falsehood and instead speak truthfully to one another, the body of Christ will be hindered in its work for the Lord.

Bitterness vs. Reconciliation

The second rule of verbal communication in this passage occurs in verses 26 and 27. Paul says put off *bitterness* by putting on *quick resolution* to conflict. God does not want you to delay resolving differences that break fellowship within the church. Notice that Paul does not condemn anger *per se*, but rather sinful anger—anger that “gives the devil a foothold.” The apostle is concerned about relational harmony in the church. When the devil has “gained a foothold,” he has wedged himself between you and a brother or sister in Christ. Allowing Satan to do so weakens the church’s ability to function, because we need one another to

accomplish God's purposes (see Ephesians 4:11-16).

As with masked deception, I find many Christians do not always recognize bitterness in their hearts. Bitterness can be defined as *clamming up when you are offended but still stewing over the offense in your mind*. Here the problem of communication is not in the choice of words but in the absence of words needed for resolution. When you are bitter, you rehearse the offense in your mind. You act as prosecutor, judge, and jury against the offender. You rationalize your thinking on the basis of what is "fair" or what you think you

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deserve. With each rehearsal and rationalization comes an intensifying of your anger (often called "hurt"). And you then respond coldly toward the person with whom you disagree, while he or she is left confused wondering, "What is wrong with you?"

Therefore, when you find yourself offended by another believer's words or actions, and you cannot get the offense out of your mind, you must seek resolution of the offense as quickly as possible. I say as quickly *as possible*, because sometimes problems cannot be resolved in twenty-four hours. However, even if the issue cannot be resolved immediately, you can reaffirm your commitment of love to the brother or sister, acknowledge your desire to work out the problem, and schedule a time as soon as possible to do so. These three initial steps remove Satan's opportunity to wedge himself between you two.

Godly communication is essential for harmonious ministry in the church. If you are going to be a godly communicator, you must heed Paul's instruction and give careful thought to your words.

Unwholesome vs. Edifying Speech

The third rule of verbal communication is found in verse 29. According to Paul, if you want to be a godly communicator you must put off *unwholesome speech* and put on *edifying speech*. Any choice of words that tears down an individual—that does not "build others up according to [his/her] needs"—qualifies as unwholesome.

This rule is especially important during conflict resolution. When you have been crossed, are you prone to curse the person with whom you are angry?

To call him names? To shift blame in a frantic attempt to look more righteous than you are? If so, you must put off such habits. Recognize unwholesome, rotten speech for what it really is: a weapon to "cut down" the other person so that you might exalt your own honor and desires.

If you violate this rule of communication, repent and ask the other person for forgiveness. Then *replace what you did say with what you should have said, had you followed this principle in the beginning*. Without this kind of backtracking and redirection of your speech on the spot, it is unlikely that you are serious about honoring God with your speech.

Another implication of this rule can be seen in non-conflict situations. Very often, those who use the weapon of unwholesome speech when crossed are those who think and speak unwholesomely at other times as well. Paul will go on in Ephesians to admonish such people: "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place [for God's people are called to be holy]..." (5:4). Even in jest, ridiculing people's legitimate differences, teasing them about aspects of their lives you do not appreciate, or making lewd and degrading remarks to them violates God's requirement that you "bridle your tongue." Replace any such tendencies in your speech and thought with a genuine concern for their needs and a sincere interest in understanding their uniqueness.

Speech that edifies (builds up) others is speech that shows a desire to help them understand themselves and their lives from God's perspective. Edifying others is not empty flattery nor catering to perceived "felt needs." It involves guiding them to see how the Bible breaks down the imprisonment of "getting my needs met," which frees their thinking from the lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Then they are in a position to live as "imitators of God" (5:1). That's edification!

Malicious vs. Gracious Speech

The last rule of verbal communication is found in verses 31,32. Here Paul says godly communicators are to put off *malicious, impulsive speech* and to put on *gracious, thoughtful speech*. Included under "malicious, impulsive speech" are rage and anger (explosive agitation), clamor (loud protests), and slander (damaging another's reputation). In all these verbal sins is the desire to hurt the other person—and that desire is acted upon immediately!

Are you prone to these verbal sins? When you disagree with someone, do you find that you say *whatever it takes* to push your views, and that anyone who disagrees with you walks away in a huff or in tears? If so,

then you violate this fourth rule of communication. If you are not sure whether or not you habitually violate this rule, ask your relatives and friends, "Do you feel

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tense around me? Do you feel like you are walking on eggshells when we are together?" If they say "yes," put off this sin by asking their forgiveness and then put on (practice) gracious, thoughtful speech.

"Gracious, thoughtful speech" is characterized by kindness and compassion (desiring to help someone with legitimate needs) and forgiveness (offering a gracious pardon so as to promote reconciliation). In order to show kindness and compassion, you must keep impulsive, selfish, malicious desires in check, consider what would be best for the other person in honoring God, and act on that. In order to show forgiveness, you must understand how "in Christ God forgave you." On the basis of Christ's death and resurrection, God offers you a pardon for your rebellion against Him. He promises never to hold your sin against you. Thus, to honor Him, you must also extend such a pardon to others so that they see His grace in your life and are drawn to Him because of it. That, ultimately, is what Christian communication is all about.