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Nonviolence, Anabaptism, and the Impossible in Communication

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In a sense, the discipline of communication is all about peace. This is so because the discipline seeks to explain the relationship between communication and understanding as well as to promote better understanding through instruction in effective communication practices. Thus, all the subdisciplines of communication—from organizational communication to public address to health communication—address both theoretical and practical questions about how communication assists or frustrates human understanding. To the extent that understanding serves as an antidote to human conflict, then, communication seeks to promote peace.

The discipline of communication is also one of the oldest academic disciplines. Already in the fifth century B.C.E., young Athenian men were receiving instruction in the strategies of persuasion. Although in its earliest days the study of communication was called rhetoric, even then it was concerned with how human beings achieve understanding through communication. Thus we learn in Plato’s Phaedrus, for instance, that it is possible to achieve understanding through dialogue between interlocutors who are essentially the same.

If communication is all about peace and if practitioners, philosophers, and scholars of communication have been trying to figure out the relationships among communication and understanding for some 2,500 years, it might seem unlikely that a nonviolent perspective would have much to teach communication about peace. Nevertheless that is just what I want to argue in this chapter. As used here, a nonviolent perspective is a multifaceted worldview derived from Anabaptist Christianity with implications for any who seek to pursue peace through communication.

Informed by the sixteenth-century Anabaptist reformation, Anabaptist nonviolence understands that the future reign of God is breaking into the world in the person and life of Jesus and that discipleship to Jesus is constitutive of that
Christian life. Since Jesus' life and teachings instruct us in nonviolence and rejection of the sword, both commitments, realized in daily practice, are central to Anabaptist understandings of discipleship. Thus discipleship results in the church as a visible community that witnesses to the reign of God in the world through nonviolence. I believe that Anabaptism understood in this way has an important contribution to make to the study of communication by way of its distinctive understanding of peace through the teachings of Jesus. In what follows I will briefly introduce two primary perspectives on communication in the discipline today and then review critiques of these perspectives from a nonviolent viewpoint. Finally, I will argue that a nonviolent Anabaptist take on the question of the relationship between communication and peace would differ significantly from all these options and will suggest some implications of such a position.

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF COMMUNICATION

According to John Durham Peters, a prominent theorist of communication, two views of communication became dominant after the Second World War. One view takes a technical approach to communication and the other a therapeutic approach. The technical view of communication holds that the problems humans experience in their efforts to understand one another are essentially technical problems. They are the effects of technical glitches such as a failing transmitter here or troublesome receiver there. For theorists and critics who take this view, the solution to misunderstanding is to repair existing communication technologies or to develop new technologies. The therapeutic view of communication takes a psychological approach that human understanding is contingent on the psychological health of the individuals communicating with one another. For theorists who work out of this perspective, misunderstanding is the effect of poor communication within the self. According to this view, I cannot hope to gain understanding from you until I first know myself. Only when I know myself well can I put my thoughts and feelings into words accurately thereby communicating effectively with you. The solution to misunderstanding for those who take the therapeutic view is, then, self-knowledge.

There are a number of problems with these two views of communication. One problem with the technical view is that it fails to notice that any technological solution merely introduces yet another mediating factor in communication. To introduce, say, the telephone to solve the problem of distance only complicates communication as it strips communication of face-to-face interaction. Another problem with both the technical view and the therapeutic view is that neither appreciates the difficulty in communication posed by the signs we are obliged to use in order to communicate. Insofar as communication is enabled by signs (the words, gestures, and images we use to communicate), it is also disabled by them...
since the meaning of any sign is always the effect of interpretation. But, most im-
portantly for the concerns of this chapter, neither view takes seriously enough the
fact that communication always entails contact between the self (understood as a
complicated entity that cannot fully know itself) and the other (who, to remain
other, must also always remain somewhat of a mystery).

This is the most significant critique of these two views of communication
for this chapter because we are called as Christians to love the other. Whether
we look to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ parables of the good Samaritan
and the prodigal son, or Jesus’ teaching that all of God’s commandments may
be reduced to just these two—that we are to love God (who is perhaps more
than anything else other) with all our heart, soul, and mind and that we are to
love our neighbor (whether friend or alien) as ourselves—what we see is the
centrality of love of other for the Christian life. Thus any adequate view of
communication from a Christian perspective must consider paramount the way
in which that view of communication theorizes the relationship between the
self and the other.

TAKING THE OTHER MORE SERIOUSLY

Working out of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theorization of conversation, Michael
King (a communication scholar and a Christian) seeks to take the other seri-
ously. In his book, Fractured Dance: Gadamer and a Mennonite Conflict over
Homosexuality, King analyzes and assesses the communication practices used
throughout a conversation about homosexuality within the Franconia conference
of the Mennonite Church. More specifically, King is interested to learn which
communication practices enabled both conversational successes and failures
among individuals who held significantly different biblical and theological po-
sitions. Thus, King’s research focuses on the question of how we are to commu-
nicate with the other. He is interested to discover which communication prac-
tices make it possible for us to have meaningful conversations with an other
whose difference takes the form of an alternative and presumably antagonistic
set of religious commitments. Out of his study of Gadamer and his field re-
search, King advocates what he calls “a third way” in which “we are called to
ask what we might learn if our focus were less on defending a given stand and
more on what it means to understand each other, even—or maybe especially—
across polarization.”

Importantly, King uses Gadamer’s theorization of conversation because
Gadamer challenges us to take the other seriously in his or her difference from us
even as he calls us to seek to understand the other. For Gadamer, understanding
between human beings is difficult not for technical or therapeutic reasons, but be-
cause the other is different. Insofar as the other comes out of a necessarily differ-
ent history than we do, we have difficulty understanding the other and vise versa.
Still, Gadamer argues, even disagreement must presume understanding at some level. This is so since to have a thoughtful disagreement requires that the self and the other share at the very least some understanding of that about which they disagree. Thus, King argues, even in the context of fierce disagreement we ought “to ask what in the other’s position, above and beneath the wrongness of it that seems so painfully obvious to so many, may nevertheless have its own valid contribution to make to our quest for truth.”

For King (as for Gadamer), then, conversational success does not depend upon gaining agreement among interlocutors but, rather, is determined by the degree to which we seek to understand the other within their difference from us: “Each speaker’s ability to grasp why the other speaker finds her or his own position persuasive is what enables the true understanding that defines conversational success.”

King is no doubt correct that Gadamer’s theory helps us to take the other seriously. Significantly for any Christian, which to my mind ought to mean a person who understands love of the other to be a question of discipleship, King’s work via Gadamer calls us first to listen intently both to the similarities and differences with the other, also to seek agreement where we can with the other, and at the very least to pursue a basic commonality with the other even amidst disagreement. By engaging in this kind of open communication, King argues, conversation and even disagreement may become an occasion for two others to come together meaningfully: “As we allow our many different prejudices to intersect, interact, even combat, they lead us toward what Gadamer’s thought might inspire us to view as the common music weaving our many different steps into one dance.”

But does Gadamer’s theory enable us to take the other seriously enough? Indeed, what does it mean for the other to be other? For my part I have been persuaded that in order for the other to be and remain other, the other must remain always to some extent unavailable to the self. As philosopher John Caputo, whose book *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* might be read as an extended essay on ethics within the problematic of the other, writes: “The alter ego [or other] ... is precisely someone whose mental life I will never know or occupy, not because of some contingent limitation on my part that I might overcome later, but because it is in principle inaccessible. The alterity of the other would be destroyed if I had access to it; the other whom I would know would not be other.”

For Caputo, the otherness of the other is not merely the effect of history (though it certainly is partly that) but has to do with the simple fact that the other is not the self. Moreover, for Caputo, remaining mindful of that intractable difference between the self and the other is crucial to any thinking about friendship, ethics, community, understanding, et cetera.

To put this concern for the alterity of the other into the context of communication raises some crucial questions. What does the quest for understanding—that is, for making the thoughts, intentions, and motives of the other accessible to the self—mean for the other? To what extent does the other remain other...
through that effort? Indeed, what does the search for commonality especially amidst disagreement do to the alterity of the other? If even in disagreement the other becomes accessible to the self, then to what extent does the other in any way remain other in the communication practices advocated by Gadamer and King? In order for the other to be truly other within any theorization of communication, doesn’t that other have to be in at least the last instance inaccessible to the self?

John Peters, the communication theorist mentioned above, would argue that Gadamer and King have missed the point. Communication does not suffer from the problem of misunderstanding. Rather, for Peters, misunderstanding and its root cause, difference, are the conditions of possibility for communication. Were it not for the difference between the self and the other—that is, were it not for the glitches, gaps, and gaffes that characterize our communication—he argues, there would be no need for communication. Indeed, were it not for the intractable difference among us, we would not seek to communicate with an other. So for Peters difference and misunderstanding are not an obstacle we ought to overcome: “The impossibility of connection, so lamented of late, may be a central and salutary feature of the human lot. The dream of communication has too little respect for personal inaccessibility. Impersonality can be a protective wall for the private heart. To ‘fix’ the gaps with ‘better’ communication might be to drain solidarity and love of all their juice.”

All this is not to say, however, that we do not or ought not seek understanding, argues Peters. On the contrary, all acts of communication are by necessity efforts at understanding: “All talk is an act of faith predicated on the future’s ability to bring forth the words called for.” When we speak, we seek understanding. However, the fact that we seek understanding, even presume it whenever we speak, does not mean that we ever achieve understanding. For Peters, the difference that makes us others to each other and that thereby makes communication valuable also makes meaning and understanding elusive: “Meaning is an incomplete project, open-ended and subject to radical revision by later events.” Peters’s point here is that understanding is never fully achieved because of difference and misunderstanding. All we ever achieve are contingent understandings. Again, for Peters, this is not a situation to be lamented since such “failure” is, among other things, precisely what keeps us talking.

Although communication, taken to be a kind of communion of minds, is not practically possible for those of us of this world due to history and difference, it is, according to Peters, theoretically possible. Or, put another way, though not possible in this world, it may be in another: “Communication is ultimately unthinkable apart from the task of establishing a peaceable kingdom in which each may dwell with the other. Given our conditions as mortals, communication will always remain a problem of power, ethics, and art.” As long as we humans are constrained by history, argues Peters, we cannot transcend difference. However, if we could ever escape our historicity and thus our difference, communication as
understanding would be possible. But to escape historicity would be to leave this world for another.

Peters’s theory of communication, focused as it is on protecting the other as truly other, makes two interventions into understandings about communication that are especially important from a nonviolent Christian perspective. The first is that this theory of communication considers the other to be central to communication. First and foremost for Peters, putting the other at the center of communication makes sure that his theorization does not make the other the same. For Peters, the only way to truly honor the otherness of the other is to admit that our intractable difference cannot be bridged. This, of course, means giving up the “dream of communication” according to which we commune with the other. But more importantly for Peters, it means that the other does not become in the course of our communicative interaction some version of ourselves. Instead, the other remains other and, not incidentally, an interesting conversation partner. The second is that ethics, as action within history that is mindful of the otherness of the other, becomes the paramount question to be asked about any communicative event. Thus, the most important question is not whether I have been understood by an other or whether I have gained agreement from that other but whether through our communicative interaction I and the other have discovered ways to love one another: “The question should be not Can we communicate with each other? but Can we love one another or treat each other with justice and mercy. . . . At best, ‘communication’ is the name for those practices that compensate for the fact that we can never be each other.” Peters’s theorization of communication, then, not only moves us away from questions about technology or self-knowledge and to questions of the other but also is intent upon protecting that other as an other and thus obliges us always to be paying attention to the ethics of our communication practices.

Because Peters’s theory of communication calls us to pay close attention to the probability that our communication practices may violate the otherness of the other, it is helpful for thinking through communication from a nonviolent perspective. Still, as one who is committed to nonviolence through an Anabaptist theology, I cannot help but ask whether understanding must be put off to another world and time. A crucial theological point for Anabaptists is that the peaceable kingdom is not entirely an eschatological space. Although Anabaptists would, like Peters, say that total peace will only come at the end of history, they would also say that even now the kingdom is partly among us. As Menno Simons argued,

we teach that which Jesus the teacher from heaven, the mouth and word of the Most High God taught (John 3:2), that now is the time of grace, a time to awake from the sleep of our ugly sins, and to be of an upright, converted, renewed, contrite, and penitent heart. Now is the time sincerely to lament before God our past reckless and willful manner of life, and in the fear of God to crucify and mortify our wicked, sinful
flesh and nature. Now is the time to arise with Christ in a new, righteous, and peni­tent existence, even as Christ says, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe the gospel.¹⁹

The kingdom is among us, Anabaptists believe, insofar as God’s people constitute the body of Christ in the here-and-now. If this is so, if the peaceable kingdom is not simply not-yet, but is also partially here through the body of Christ, then how should we be thinking about communication?

TOWARD AN ANABAPTIST NONVIOLENT VIEW OF COMMUNICATION

The Anabaptist nonviolent view of communication toward which I want to move would take the following two key presuppositions into account: (1) that the other is and should remain truly other; and (2) that the peaceable kingdom is already partly here. The former presupposition is important for protecting the other as other. It constitutes a radical nonviolent posture toward the other because it obliges us to communicate not in order to make the other understandable to us but rather to enable us to welcome the other as different from us.²⁰ Rather than seek to bring the other into our comprehensibility, this posture calls us to await their alterity. The latter presupposition is important because it obliges us to approach the other in anticipation of understanding. It demands patience from us within which we would strive to bridge the intractable gap between us and them. Rather than give up in despair at the difficulties posed by differences between myself and the other, this posture calls me to persist at the hard work that is communication.

In this short chapter, there is not space to offer a comprehensive theorization of a nonviolent approach to communication based in Anabaptist theology. However, in the space that I do have remaining, I would like to suggest what it might be like to communicate out of such a posture.

Anyone who would speak out of such a nonviolent Anabaptist posture would expect misunderstanding in any communicative event. If communication is taken to be the encounter of two others who, in order to remain other (as they ought), must remain something of a mystery to one another, then misunderstanding will be a dominant feature of any communication. Importantly, though, if misunderstanding were expected, then it would not be focused upon as the problem to be solved, the aberration to be eliminated, the obstacle to be overcome. Instead, it would be considered normal. This would be important, for if we were to take it seriously (as I am suggesting we should), it would mean that any time I approach a conversation, I should expect to be misunderstood. I should expect that the other will not take my meaning, will think I am saying something other than I think I am saying. Furthermore, such a posture would also demand that we expect to misunderstand the other.
Such a posture would radically transform our experience of communication. It would require of us a great deal of modesty. To make this more concrete, consider how any antagonists in a conflict would be obliged to change their communication practices if they assumed they were being misunderstood and were misunderstanding. How much more effort might they put into explaining themselves? How much harder might they listen to their interlocutor?

Yet, even as the first presupposition would demand of us that we expect misunderstanding (and speak accordingly), the second presupposition would require that we seek to understand the other nevertheless. Because the second presupposition assumes that the kingdom of God is already here, we would be obliged to talk out of an aspiration for understanding. That is to say, even as we expect misunderstanding, we must converse with an aim to understanding. Within a nonviolent Anabaptist perspective we could not simply assent to the first presupposition and give up on understanding altogether. We could not resign ourselves to misunderstanding and all that follows from it (such as cynicism, the will to power, etc.). Since in a nonviolent Anabaptist view the first presupposition would not operate without the second, we would strive for understanding even as we would expect misunderstanding. Thus it would be appropriate for us to speak modestly (since we would assume that we have not understood and are not being understood) yet earnestly, sensitively, and articulately in the hope of being understood (because the Kingdom is also among us). Out of such faith we would try to make sense of the discourse out of which the other speaks.

Finally, if we were to take the other seriously as other yet seek to understand that other, then we would become engaged in what I would call truly open communication. Communication of this sort would be truly open not because we would have solved the problems of understanding but because it would make us open to radical transformation. If we were to speak always in recognition of the normalcy of misunderstanding yet in anticipation of understanding, we might just succeed in welcoming the other to us. If that were to happen, if we were to invite the alterity of the other through our modesty toward understanding and our aspirations for understanding, I think we would make ourselves available to radical change.

Although what I am saying here may seem strange, it also strikes me as strangely familiar. That is because it reminds me of my experience reading the gospels. Whenever I read the Gospels I have a strong sense that I am encountering the other. Those texts do not make ready sense to me and indeed do not even seem to be addressing me. Yet still I am compelled to try to make sense of them. And somewhere in between my misunderstanding and my hope of the other we call Emmanuel, I believe I have been transformed. In a way, all that I am suggesting here is that a nonviolent Anabaptist view would embrace the frustration and the possibility of that experience of encountering the scriptures or any other who, by necessity, must confound us. Indeed, perhaps all I am trying to say in this short chapter is that a nonviolent Anabaptist view of communication would call...
us to engage any other as we must engage the Jesus of the gospels—in expectation of misunderstanding and in anticipation of a miracle.

NOTES

4. Interestingly, Peters attributes the emergence of both the technical and the therapeutic views of communication to the development of communication technologies such as the telegraph. With technology as the leading metaphor for communication process, questions focused on how to remove obstacles (whether technical or psychological) to improve communication. Previously communication had been understood as a process of interpretation across distance. See Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, especially 1–31.
5. For a summary of Peters’s critique of these two views of communication, see *Speaking into the Air*, 263–271.
7. Gadamer theorizes that differences emerge out of “prejudices” that are the necessary effects of our own historicity, or what he calls “finiteness.” For King’s review of these key terms in Gadamer’s thought, see *Fractured Dance*, 38–40.
12. For another study from within Communication (and the subdiscipline of Rhetoric) that comes to this conclusion through different means (namely, close readings of Kenneth Burke’s works), see Barbara Biesecker, *Addressing Postmodernity: Kenneth Burke, Rhetoric, and a Theory of Social Change* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).
17. "The other, not the self, should be the center of whatever ‘communication’ might mean." Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 265.


20. This idea of welcoming the other as other, rather than seeking to make the other into something like the self, is borrowed from John Caputo’s readings of Jacques Derrida’s recent work on friendship. See, for instance, John Caputo, "Who Is Derrida’s Zarathustra? Of Fraternity, Friendship, and a Democracy to Come," in *More Radical Hermeneutics*, 60–83.