Communicating the Grace of God in a Pluralist Society

Saarinen, Risto

Fortress Press
2005


http://hdl.handle.net/10138/42022

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.
Communicating the Grace of God in a Plural Society

Risto Saarinen

1. Communication

The notion of communication originates from two historical root meanings. The one dealing with communion or koinonia should be obvious to all theologians. Communication takes place in a community; at least some togetherness and relationship must be presupposed in order that one can communicate. The other root meaning deals with the Latin word munus, which can mean a gift or a task or both. A communicating person has or knows the munus, the gift and task. The gift is disseminated through communication.

The dual or dialectic meaning of the English word communication is likewise related to these two roots. In many old-fashioned contexts, for instance when someone is said to present a scientific communication, the aspect of disseminating the munus is emphasized. But in many modern or modernistic contexts people like to emphasize the process of communication, its interactive and relational nature. The modern view of communication stresses the reciprocity and dialogue inherent in the community; the message should be relevant in order that it can be understood and nurtured. For the sake of contextual relevance and dialogical interaction, the sender is called to modify, reformulate and thus to manipulate the message.

On the other hand, if we lay our emphasis on the munus, on the gift and task, we highlight the authenticity of the message independently of its target group. The sender is called to take care of the authenticity and, furthermore, to disseminate the message as effectively as he or she can. The sender should not modify or manipulate the message and the sender can be rather careless with regard to how the message is received. The receiver is not dependent on the interactive process of communication. The receiver is left free to do whatever he or she likes to with the message. In the munus model, the sender thus loses the control over the message and the message remains receiver-centered after its dissemination.

In the two models of communication we are facing the two old, well-known paradigms for transmitting the gospel. The model of preaching and proclamation often stresses the authenticity of our gift and task. The model of counseling and dialogue stresses the communal aspect of Christian discourse. At the same time, we are facing the two 20th century paradigms of communication science. It has often been claimed that much of the 20th century mass media was characterized by broadcasting and dissemination, that is, by one-way communication within which no dialogue was possible. But luckily, so goes the prevailing opinion, the shortcomings of this paradigm were to some extent compensated by dialogical models of group work, democratic grassroot movements and to an extent also by the new media which aims at interactive two-way communication. ¹

In the world of secular communication, many scholars have believed that whereas the broadcasting and dissemination paradigm is authoritarian, the dialogical or communicative paradigm is inherently democratic and can therefore avoid the shortcomings of the dissemination model. This belief has been accompanied with the idea of authority-free communication: if the group or community can freely discuss a topic, it can achieve a rational

consensus which approaches the truth.  

More recently, however, media researchers have become aware that the dialogical model is not as innocent as all that. The advantage of controlling and modifying the message with the help of interactive possibilities has its price. This price can consist of several factors and it can become very high. First, the message may lose something of its integrity or authenticity when it becomes modified in the process of communication. An extreme form of this problem becomes visible in such group work in which the group believes that the message emerges out of nowhere as a result of mere discussion. Second, the sender's possibility of controlling the message may be a disadvantage. If the sender is wrong in the first place, the sender nevertheless has the possibility of conjectures and new pretexts when the group reacts. Thus a wrong opinion does not die out, but continues its existence in a modified fashion. Third, it can be argued that an interactive model cannot disseminate messages truly effectively. Advertising, for instance, is only very rarely done in an interactive fashion. Advertisers are convinced that one-way announcement or broadcasting simply works better.

Because of such reasons some media scholars have turned towards the rehabilitation of the old paradigm of broadcasting. John Durham Peters, for instance, claims that both paradigms of communication are in fact classical. He labels the dialogical paradigm as the model of Socrates, who always approached the truth by means of dialogue and interactive counseling. The dissemination or munus paradigm is for Peters the model of Jesus, since in the parable of the Sower the seed was distributed effectively everywhere without interaction or even regard to whether the soil was fertile or not.

Whereas the Socratic model is private and esoteric, since the addressed person or people are carefully chosen insiders or group members, the dissemination model of Jesus is exoteric and public. In the parable or the sower diverse responses to a uniform event are portrayed. Peters employs the example of gift giving as an illustration in which sense a one-way dissemination is valuable. Gift giving can become something more than an economic exchange. Although one probably has to presuppose some reciprocity in the final analysis of gift giving, it is essential that one can distinguish a unilateral action of giving from the bilateral economic exchange and that the one-way giving sometimes displays an added value in comparison with the two-way exchange.

Peters does not aim at a neo-conservative rehabilitation of one-way authority. He wants to show that both dissemination and dialogue are needed for good and wholesome communication. In the final rounds of the game of communication, it is the interplay of self and other that is at stake. The dissemination paradigm has an inherent tendency to emphasize the others, that is, the message and the receivers. The dialogue paradigm may, if it forgets the freedom of the others in their otherness, become a constrained and unfruitful occupation with the self or with the few insiders. It is the balance between self and others that must be kept in mind in good communication.

2. Grace as Gift

---


3 Peters, *op.cit.*, esp. 57-58.
After this preliminary elaboration with communication theory I will now turn to my actual topic. Within the context of a brief lecture, I will concentrate on only one aspect of grace, namely, grace as gift. Calling grace an unmerited gift of God which is not achieved by our own works is a distinctively, although not exclusively, Lutheran way of speaking. Since the notion of gift is inherent in the concept of communication as well, it offers an adequate, although far from exhaustive, perspective to our theme.

Lutheran theology of grace and justification has often been explained, and rightly, I think, in terms of God's free gift of forgiveness and new life. Our relationship to God does not consist of buying and selling, but of receiving the gift. The reciprocal economy of accomplishments and performances is replaced by the somewhat one-sided economy of gift giving. In this giving, God must remain the sovereign Giver in order that the gift language does not change into a language of payments and achievements. The so-called new Finnish Luther interpretation emphasizes this by saying with Luther that God's being is in giving. In this sense Lutheran theology presupposes the priority and uniqueness of God, the idea of letting God be God. God is not a partner in dialogue, but the sovereign Giver.

In April 2002 the Lutheran World Federation organized a meeting "Justification Today", in which the problem of communicating the grace of God in today's world was extensively elaborated. Prompted by the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the group reports of this meeting emphasize the otherness of God:

"In Martin Luther's theology justification is related to the salvation event, but not in an individualistic manner. Lutheran theology rejects the charges of excessive preoccupation with the self. The message of justification speaks of a God who is not there primarily to satisfy our egoistic wishes and needs. 'Let God be God' is Luther's message which challenges the egoism of the human individual and the humankind as a whole. God, who is true love, gives us everything as a gift. This love calls for a wider scope of experience and understanding of God's engagement than our egoism allows. The almighty God cares for the world in a manner which transcends all egoism."

The group report sets out to overcome the so-called salvation egoism by focusing on God as the great Other who transcends our small wishes. When the group report addresses Lutheran social ethics, the same principle is applied to the neighbour. The neighbour must not be seen as one's competitor and rival, but as the other who has his or her genuine freedom and otherness:

---

4 For some other aspects, see R. Saarinen, Gnade: Systematisch-theologisch, in: Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, 4. Aufl., Bd. 3, 1032-1035. - For the following reflections, which are entirely of my own responsibility, I am nevertheless indebted to various scholars: Prof. Miroslav Volf and his doctoral students who invited me to participate in their seminar on "Grace and Gift" in Yale, Oct 28, 2002; Dr. Sammeli Juntunen (Helsinki) who also lectured in that seminar; Dr. Bo Holm (Aarhus), whose works we Finns have discussed in many occasions.


6 Justification Today: Theological Assumptions. Forthcoming from the LWF.
"Justified sinners are called to care for justice in their families, communities, societies, and in the world as a whole. The message of grace and justification teaches us that the laws of competition, rivalry, achievement, and efficacy do not ultimately determine who human beings are. We must cease to see our fellow humans as rivals in order to recognize their true humanity. In this sense justification by faith is a counter-cultural principle in the societies determined by today's exclusively profit-oriented market economy based on competition. Justification can thus bring forth the fruits of care and friendship, but also disinterested freedom and respect of the others in their genuine freedom and otherness."

In these passages the transcendence of God and the otherness of divine gift are emphasized. This emphasis is not merely introduced as an abstract theological principle, but it becomes applied to concrete circumstances and can thus make a criticism of the value systems of today's societies, especially of neo-liberalist market economy. We can see from this example that a message needs not to be adapted to the prevailing circumstances in order to become relevant. The picture of divine gift giving is a relevant idea precisely because of its otherness. If we first seek relevance, we may remain bound to the limits of our egoistic needs. Turning away from these allows us to see relevance elsewhere.

In the early history of Lutheranism, many social reforms, like education and poor relief, were coherently seen as applications of the core theological doctrine. Theological concentration and social relevance were partners; the theology of grace as gift did not lead to social quietism.

3. The Gift of Forms of Life

There is one particular dimension in Martin Luther's theology in which the connection between the divine giving and the social dimension is especially important. I mean Luther's view of the three estates or orders, in German Dreiständelehre. The great historical importance of this theory for Lutheranism has been repeatedly pointed out by Luther scholars.

I have argued elsewhere that the theory of three orders in fact comes from late medieval nominalism, in which various kinds of divine ordinances were treated as divine promises, divine gifts or donations, or as the two testaments or covenants of God with humankind. Various misrepresentations of the three orders have occurred because scholars have not been aware of this medieval background. In terms of nominalist theology it is adequate to treat the three orders as gifts which involve a promise and a covenant.

Luther's three orders are the family, the state and the church. God's gift of Eve to
Adam - and of Adam to Eve - established the family as nuclear society. God's gift of moral order, and later the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ, i.e. the two testaments, established the ecclesial order. The state was an emergency order established after the Fall. In principle the state or society can be reduced to families and is therefore not really an independent order.

The orders are established by God. They are no contracts of the usual kind, but they follow the structure of gift and promise. In this sense they are not dialogical or reciprocal in their basic outlook, but reflect the being of God as the Giver. Of course everything is created by God and is thus in a sense a gift, but the family and the church are gifts of special order. They are permanent structures in which God's goodness and grace are apparent in a particular manner. One may note that the term estate (Stand) is misleading, since for Luther every human person belongs to all three orders at the same time. Each of the orders is a form of life (genus vitae11) in which the Christians exercise their duties. Luther repeatedly stresses how the Christian should understand that the life-form is a gift which is not to be won through competition, merit or achievement, but which is at hand here and now to be received.

With regard to the three orders, Luther often points out in what sense they involve co-operation between God and humans. With regard to the family and the state, human beings co-operate as secondary and instrumental causes. A parent nursing a child is the instrument of care-taking which is finally done by God. In terms of late medieval theology, this was far more than a minimal degree of causality. It was thought of as a rather significant causality of co-operation, since it represents a mode of physical and natural causality. In the church, human co-operation is significantly less for Luther, almost nothing. I will not discuss today the tricky question what the ecclesial co-operation finally is. I will only mention that Luther affirms a greater degree of human co-operation in the life-form of family, at the same time while both forms of life presuppose that the divine action is basically a gift.

4. Sociology of Gifts

Lutheran theology confronts us with the conceptual issues related to gifts. In what sense do gifts involve a co-operation between the giver and the receiver? In the 20th century this question was asked by anthropologists and sociologists. Today it is asked by many philosophers and communication scholars as well. This question has always been asked by Western theologians, among them also by Luther. I have already remarked that some communication scholars want to rehabilitate the old idea of communication as transmitting a munus, a gift, from sender to receiver. In philosophical sociology, the rehabilitation of a traditional idea of gift has recently been undertaken by some anti-utilitarian scholars, perhaps most notably by Jacques T. Godbout.12 It is important to realize that the concept which Lutherans have analyzed so extensively for centuries has now become prominent in other fields of human inquiry as well, and to some extent with accents similar to Lutheranism. I will briefly present Godbout's results before returning to the issue of grace and co-operation in the theology of gift.

Godbout follows Marcel Mauss's classical study Essai sur le don in claiming that we

---

11 For this notion, see e.g. WA 40/1, 544,24; WA 43,21,3; 198,30.
cannot simply reduce the reality of gift-giving to the simple utilitarian models of economic exchange. But in a manner which differs from Mauss and against many other anthropologists Godbout argues that there are something like free gifts, that is, disinterested giving. Gifts are not simply extended or delayed reciprocity, but a rather autonomous cultural and semantic category which should be carefully distinguished from the two other basic forms of exchange, that is, from the economic relationships which comprise buying and selling, and from the public sector which comprises taxes and other duties to the state and society. In addition to the *homo oeconomicus*, we should acknowledge the *homo donator*, the rather altruistic agent who voluntarily serves other people, buys Christmas presents to children and exercises charity.

We see that both John Durham Peters in communication theory and Jacques Godbout in sociology rehabilitate the common sense idea that people give gifts, disseminate messages and fulfill tasks unilaterally and that this is quite ordinary behaviour. This does not mean, however, that the receiver does not do anything or that he or she merely remains passive. Even a free lunch is eaten by its receiver. Like many other theorists of the gift, Godbout thinks that some activity from the part of the receiver is conceptually necessary, or almost conceptually necessary in order that we can speak of gifts. Freedom from both the part of the giver and from the part of the receiver is almost necessarily presupposed in the act of gift-giving. Emphasizing the character of gift and downplaying the idea of payment do not decrease this freedom but probably increase it.¹³

Godbout illustrates this state of affairs with Escher's drawing *Day and Night*. Giving implies receiving as the white birds and the landscape in this drawing, when seen together, constitute the black birds flying in the opposite direction, or vice versa. It is not a causal implication that is meant, but a conceptual picture drawn through the idea of giving a gift. A gift does not consist of putting something mechanically somewhere, but the very idea of gift takes it for granted that something is received as well. At the same time, however, the idea of gift remains distinct from buying and selling. The counter-act of receiving is different from the counter-act of buying, just like the act of giving is genuinely different from the act of selling. In both cases there is some kind of reciprocity, but they remain different cases.

5. Responsive Reception

In Luther, the parent who nurses a child is receiving God's gift in the natural ordinance of family. The child is receiving care from both God, the primary cause, and from the parent, the secondary cause. The parent is both giving and receiving at the same time. In fact, the very same act of nursing is both giving and receiving for the parent. The paradigm of gift giving is for Luther nothing like idleness. In the orders of household and society there is enough active work for all human powers, at the same time that these orders are to be seen in terms of gift.¹⁴

At this point somebody may think that my presentation is not fully coherent. First, I highlighted the importance of one-way communication and gift giving, saying that instead of

---


¹⁴ Cf. WA 50,652 and Saarinen (forthcoming).
all quasi-democratic and quasi-interactive models of reciprocity we should again see the advantages and the relative fairness of one-way models. Second, I pointed out that Lutheran theology in its understanding of grace as gift is compatible with one-way communication theory and anti-utilitarian sociology. But now, as a third point, from this theoretical construction the human person as a relatively free subject unexpectedly appears, a subject who is capable of co-operation or at least responsivity.

Let me try to make the third point coherent as well. I stressed that in modernist communication theory, in utilitarian sociology and in the theology of self-righteousness the two-way dialogical principle was a prerequisite or a precondition of the contract between giver/sender and receiver. The two-way traffic constitutes these phenomena. But in Peters's gift model of communication, in Godbout's anti-utilitarian theory of 

\textit{homo donator} and in Luther's view of grace as gift the receiver's freedom is not constitutive of the process described even though it is maintained as a part of the end result. The gift-like process or phenomenon was described without presupposing the receiver's interaction with it. So, at least one can conceptualize the paradigm of gift in this one-way manner. My third point only says that in this conceptualization the receiver's freedom can be and is in fact maintained.

There is one sense, I admit and even claim, in which a responsive receiver is not only an appendix of giving but must be presupposed in any theory of giving and gift. The very concepts of giving and gift in ordinary language normally presuppose that the object is a responsive and animated being. I can give a book to you, but I do not give the book to the bookshelf but simply put it there. I never give gifts to bookshelves or other inanimate objects. Animals are an interesting borderline case: I can give something to a dog, e.g. food or a ball. But normally we do not give gifts to animals. In this sense the vocabulary of giving presupposes some responsibility and openness in the receiver. To use Escher's drawing as an illustration, the white birds of giving have the black birds of receiving as their shadow. This sense does not, however, diminish the point that gift giving highlights the one-way traffic which distinguishes it from dialogue and exchange.

\section{Sacrifice}

There is yet another feature of gift giving which is prominent both in contemporary philosophy and in Luther. I mean the concept of sacrifice, which is normally understood as a special way of effective giving. In offering a sacrifice the giver is trying to prompt the expected response in an almost magical or mechanistic manner. A sacrifice is not seldom expected to work \textit{ex opere operato}, by the mere performance of an act. We are all familiar, I think, of the Lutheran criticism of the sacrifice of the mass. In the context of this criticism Luther develops a general view of human person as a being who is everywhere tempted to please God through offering good works as sacrifices. This sacrificial behaviour is for Luther a sophisticated kind of self-righteousness which he vehemently opposes.\footnote{V. Vajta, \textit{Theologie des Gottesdienstes bei Luther}, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1952, shows this in an exemplary manner.}

Perhaps also here it does not harm Lutheran theologians to be aware of some parallel philosophical discussions. Some Christian philosophers, like René Girard, have claimed that we should become aware of our sacrificial behaviour and, in the final analysis, give up sacrificial models of thought because they are inevitably connected with violence. I have great
sympathy for Girard and think that Luther's criticism of sacrifice resembles his ideas.\textsuperscript{16}

Giving up all sacrificial behaviour sounds very Lutheran. Generally speaking, it also communicates well with today's world. But on a closer look, the claim to abandon all sacrifices creates a problem which has been spelled out by Jacques Derrida and many others.\textsuperscript{17} If the enlightened and generous person gives up all sacrifices, what is this person actually doing? He or she is "sacrificing the sacrifices" at the altar of one's own enlightened generosity. But through performing this final sacrifice the person becomes even more bound to the archaic idea of sacrifice. The final sacrifice or the last self-centered gift does not bring about the expected result, because it merely repeats the mode of sacrificial behaviour. Instead of getting rid of the last problem you have two problems. This philosophical criticism of Derrida has a certain theological counterpart in Protestant discussions relating to the liturgical forms of the Eucharist: if you aim at sacrificing everything that is sacrificial, you will end up with more problems than you had in the beginning.\textsuperscript{18}

The Lutheran view of the grace of God as a gift and a promise which "can admit of no sacrifice", as Luther says\textsuperscript{19}, does communicate well. There is, however, a limit to this communication. Divine giving and human receiving and giving can be understood in a rather profound manner, but they cannot be fully understood. Up to a point it is advisable to stress the passivity of the receiver. But beyond this point it is more advisable to mention the personal involvement and responsiveness of the receiver. Likewise, up to a point one should stress that mercy cannot admit any sacrifices. But beyond this point one's enlightened generosity again becomes sacrificial. This is, I think, what we can communicate about God's grace as gift with the distinctive understanding of Lutheran theology.

7. Plurality, Trinity and the Other

My last point concerns the alleged "plural" character of today's society. Jesus's parable of the Sower highlights that there was plurality in his time as well. The parable both realizes and ignores the problem of plurality. The message must be disseminated, and the one who has ears, will hear. The event of dissemination is uniform and the responses are diverse. But there remains in the parable a final indifference with regard to this diversity. The observation of this indifference does not make it easy to address pluralism.

There is one direction which I do not find particularly helpful. The Lutheran theology of gift outlined here is not easily connected with some versions of today's Trinitarian theology. I mean those Trinitarian theologies which stress the reciprocity and the dialogical character of Trinity and employ this theological resource for drawing analogies between human communities and the inner-trinitarian communion.\textsuperscript{20} I have serious doubts whether


\textsuperscript{17} See e.g. H. de Vries, \textit{Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida}, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2002, 200-207 (discussion among Girard, Jean-Luc Nancy and Derrida) and Godbout, \textit{op.cit.}, 292-298 (Girard and Godbout).


\textsuperscript{19} WA 8, 518.

\textsuperscript{20} I have addressed this issue in more detail in my: The Concept of Communion in
the dialogical life among the three divine persons can serve as a helpful example in debates concerning the diverse or even pluralistic nature of human societies. The otherness of God as Giver and the particular character of grace as gift are easily forgotten if our theology of communion is primarily based on the idea of reciprocal dialogue. To put the point very bluntly: grace should be communicated in terms of free gift rather than as mutual sharing. In the model of sharing we get too close to ourselves and ignore the Other.

Of course any reflection on grace and gift should nevertheless be coherent with Trinitarian theology. We do identify the Christian God as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is much historical reason to stress the importance of inner-trinitarian life and the distinct characters of the three persons. But there is also a risk of projecting our own wishes and diversities into God, thus seeing ourselves where we should see the Other. "For between Creator and a creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them." This famous definition of *analogia entis* was given by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 explicitly in order to downplay the view that the unity between Father and the Son would be comparable to the unity among the disciples of Christ, as expressed in John 17. Ecumenists and theologians of communion have a tendency to forget the dissimilarity between divine unity and human fellowship.

Instead of dialogical trinitarianism, I would rather start an elaboration of plurality with the quote from the Lutheran World Federation group report: "Justification can thus bring forth the fruits of care and friendship, but also disinterested freedom and respect of the others in their genuine freedom and otherness." I will not elaborate on this further, but will only point at a certain direction. It may be that the authentic seed disseminated or the true gift given contains such wisdom and such depth of the divine riches which will surprise both myself in my limited self-understanding and the others in their otherness. Apostle Paul reminds us of this element of uncontrolled surprise when he says in Romans 11:33-35: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. ... For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to God to receive a gift in return?"
