

Review of: Muehlhoff, Tim, and Todd V. Lewis (2010). *Authentic Communication: Christian Speech Engaging Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010 (219 pages). \$16.14.

By Benson Fraser, Ph.D., Regent University

Cite as follows: Fraser, Benson (2015). *Authentic Communication: Christian Speech Engaging Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press[Book Review]. Christianity and Communication Studies Network, 2(1), <http://theccsn.com/book-reviews/?r=5211>

“Just as an old man who has lost his teeth now munches with the help of the stumps, so the modern Christian language about Christianity has lost the power of the energetic terminology to bite—and the whole thing is toothless ‘maundering’” (Søren Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 363). Likewise, Muehlhoff and Lewis seek to retool the church’s witness by helping Christian university students and Christian leaders “reclaim a deep appreciation for human communication” (p. 30), thus putting the bite back into our Christian witness. In their book, *Authentic Communication: Christian Speech Engaging Culture*, the authors integrate selected communication theories with scripturally informed convictions in an effort to help students form a Christian worldview. As they state, “a central claim of this volume is that *through the study and practice of communication we accomplish crucial aspects in the life of a believer*” [italics original] (p. 30).

Muehlhoff and Lewis’s text is divided into two sections. The first section comprises four chapters that discuss key components of the communication process. In Chapter one the authors briefly define and describe fundamentals of human communication. They then encourage Christians to be more effective and appropriate in their communicative behavior. Their overview identifies and discusses many elements of the communication process, but its brevity leaves some important elements such as nonverbal communication out of the discussion.

Chapter two explores the role perceptions play in how communicators view themselves and others. The authors draw on Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm to emphasize the importance of story in imposing order and meaning into our lives. Their discussion will help students unfamiliar with Fisher’s work. Chapter three examines how words or symbols are essential components of creating and maintaining personal relationships and of expressing ideas, feelings, and philosophy. Finally, chapter four briefly introduces several theories of rhetoric and persuasion that the authors find especially relevant to Christians’ communicating truth in today’s world.

The purpose of the first section is not to break new theoretical ground but to review the communication process in light of current theories in the field and to do so from a decidedly Christian perspective. The strength of this text is its accessibility to university and college students serving as a strong example of how one’s faith can be integrated into the theoretical material in one’s academic field or discipline.

One challenge for the authors is that in their attempt to cover so much intellectual terrain, they omit many ideas or leave important ideas under-developed. One example occurs at the end of their discussion of the definition of communication. The authors state that “the process of communication is not limited to the mere transference of ideas or information” (p. 42).

Furthermore, in citing Gregory J. Shepherd, they assert that communication is “not something that is either accomplished, or not, depending upon whether a message was accurately received, but rather a certain sort of opportunity or possibility realized, an experience of self and other, however good or bad” (p. 42). Although most scholars agree that communication should not be defined as simply a “transference of ideas or information,” it is not clear how communication is “a certain sort of opportunity or possibility realized” (Shepherd, 2006, pp. 23-4). The implication of Shepherd’s fascinating statement deserves to be more fully discussed. Unfortunately, Muehlhoff and Lewis end the section without clarifying this statement or discussing other views of communication theory. For example, in *Communicating for Life*, Quentin J. Schultze covers much of the same theoretical territory when discussing the transmission view of communication. However, he also discusses the cultural view of communication advanced by James W. Carey.

The second section of the book applies the communication concepts discussed in section one to several strategic issues in the field of communication study. I will not try to cover each topic in chapters five through twelve but only introduce the topics and then discuss some concerns with these chapters.

Chapter five addresses interpersonal conflicts that threaten the unity of a group or organization, and chapter six discusses how communication can help bring forgiveness to those who are offended. Chapter seven touches on how one uses rhetorical theories to communicate Christian worldviews in today’s mediated and technology-dominated culture. Chapter eight focuses on Christian communicators as counterpublics. In chapters nine and ten, Muehlhoff and Lewis focus on communicating the Christian message in a postmodern culture. Chapter eleven deals with how we communicate with those who want to disagree and are hostile to the Christian perspective. Finally, chapter twelve challenges Christian communicators to take on social justice issues—especially how we speak for those who have been abandoned and silenced—by anchoring communication to social justice “in the moral character of God” (p. 210).

In each of these chapters, the authors seek to explore how the Scriptures illustrate, challenge, and broaden our understanding and use of communication. For example, in chapter five we are called to face up to those with whom we are in conflict. Muehlhoff and Lewis state that “instead of avoiding conflict, the Scriptures encourage believers to deal with conflict promptly” (p. 103). Similarly, in chapter twelve, the authors suggest that “authentic spirituality shows itself in social action” (p. 200); Christians, therefore, are called to address social justice issues by speaking and behaving in responsible ways to women, children, and the outcast.

On the whole, *Authentic Communication* is discerning and useful particularly to students who are new to the field or who have not seriously tried to integrate their religious beliefs into their worldview. My sense of this text is that Muehlhoff and Lewis can be usefully incorporated into an undergraduate class on communication and communication theory. It would be an easy read for undergraduates and introduces several useful communication theories in a helpful way. But I doubt that it would serve as a graduate text, with the possible exception of being used in an introduction to communication at the master’s level.

Moreover, the text is decidedly speech and rhetorically oriented but does include a chapter on evaluating messages from popular culture. Apart from that, it does not contain material on mediated communication or on any of the social media. Nor does it cover the cultural

approach to communication, which is so usefully addressed in Schultze's work *Communicating for Life*. Schultze's work is dated but does cover more intellectual territory than the Muehlhoff and Lewis text.

There are, however, a couple of areas of disquiet I will briefly address. These are not intended as grave criticisms, but rather as helpful critiques to create avenues for future conversation.

First, as noted in the series preface to the book by Francis J. Beckwith and J. P. Moreland, Muehlhoff and Lewis focus considerable attention on postmodernism, almost completely neglecting problems inherent in modernity. They dedicate two chapters to postmodernism and none to modernity, and throughout the volume they continually make mostly negative references to postmodernism without the same attention or criticism given to modernity.

Clearly they are aware of the challenges that both modernity and postmodernism present to Christians' striving to bear witness to Christ in today's world. Although the authors state, "modernists or postmodernists dismiss Christian viewpoints as 'nice for you, but not for me'" (p. 145), they continually challenge postmodernist ideas while making only scant references and criticisms of modernity. In so doing they fail to address fully the problems inherent in the modernist metanarrative. The challenges, virtues, and vices of both of these cultural influences need not be fully developed here, but it is disconcerting that attention to modernist problems among Christians is absent. This is especially true since many of the problems inherent in the cultural expression of postmodernism, such as individualism and consumerism, find their genesis in modernity (Smith, 2006, p. 20).

This is important because as students, teachers, and communication practitioners who are engaged in Christian witness we should not embrace "the modernist's valorization of scientific facts and end up reducing Christianity to just another collection of propositions" (Smith, 2006, p. 74). Ignoring the influence of modernity on our communicative behavior not only reduces the influence of the narrative thrust of the gospel, but it also can be argued that it weakens the effectiveness of our truth telling. Here we may see the tension between narrative and proposition, faith and reason, and knowledge and behavior. All of these issues have important ramifications for communication from a Christian worldview. Modernity is often so thoroughly integrated and concealed in our culture that we scarcely notice its influence. Yet modernistic thinking profoundly affects our lives and shapes our understanding of human communication.

A second issue related to modernism and discussed briefly by Muehlhoff and Lewis in the chapters dealing with postmodernism concerns the role of faith and reason in communicating truth. Modernism makes reason the supreme epistemology for determining what we believe. Under modernist influence, Christianity is viewed as a system of truth or ideas, not as an active community of believers who embody and live out truth as the church, whose head is Christ. As James K. A. Smith writes, "modern Christianity tends to think of the church either as a place where individuals come to find answers to their questions or as one more stop where individuals can try to satisfy their consumerists' desires. As such, Christianity becomes intellectualized rather than incarnate, commodified rather than the site of genuine community" (Smith, 2006, p. 29). Many Christians have unknowingly succumbed to the modernist view, reducing Christianity to just another collection of propositions that marginalizes the centrality of the Incarnation.

Ultimately, what is at stake is a biblical understanding of the relationship between faith and reason as they function in human communication. At times, Muehlhoff and Lewis seem to side with those who argue that matters of faith can be settled through objective and historical verification (pp. 150-151), while at other times they seem to argue that objective verification has its limits. They provide no clear direction on whether to engage our culture with reasoned arguments, with stories, or with both. Discussion of the role of narrative communication in invoking the imagination to present provocative messages where arguments fail is sorely lacking. Muehlhoff and Lewis briefly discuss man as *homo narrans* and see narrative as “a key tool in how we come to believe” (p. 52), but they fail to explain when and how to use this tool.

The modernist approach of defending Christian propositions (or Christian doctrine) through modernist means that are ahistorical, unsituated, and abstract have clearly failed to move many people toward Christ. This propositional approach is not featured in most Scripture which is more often filled with story, question, poetry, song, parable, and other indirect means of communication. As C. S. Lewis noted, we need to “sneak past the watchful dragons” that block people from being open to anything religious and find a different approach to communicating the truth (p. 37).

In conclusion, despite the criticism I have offered, *Authentic Communication* is a worthy study of integrating communication theory with scriptural truth. It will serve as a useful text on communication and worldview for students with Christian concerns—thereby sharpening the teeth of the Christian witness.

References

- Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, Vol. 1*. Edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Lewis, C. S. *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. Edited by Walter Hooper. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1994.
- Muehlhoff, Tim, and Todd V. Lewis. *Authentic Communication: Christian Speech Engaging Culture*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.
- Shepherd, Gregory J. Communication as Transcendence, in *Communication as...: Perspectives on Theory*. Edited by Gregory J. Shepherd, Jeffrey St. John, and Ted Striphas. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Smith, James K. A. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006.