

# THE COMMUNICATIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE WORD OF GOD

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## Abstract

This article analyses an important aspect of Communication Theology, which basically is the exhibitive character of the Word. The exhibitive character basically means that the Word of God is an event of grace. This means that when one receives or hears the Word of God, they receive the grace of God. The reception of the Word of God, is neither a dry, nor a communicative event, but it is an event in which one receives the graces of God. There are many ways in which the graces of God are communicated and given to the human person. One of these ways is the Word of God in scripture. Through scripture, one receives the graces of God - that is why - one can listen to the word of God and later say "I felt comforted" or "I felt blessed" through the reception of the Word of God. All this shows that the reception of the Word of God is a communicative event - it is an event through which one receives the graces of God.

**Keywords:** *Word of God, communication theology, Jesus Christ.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Word of God as pronounced in the Church is the continuing presence and offer of the salvation of God for the whole world. The Word of God, continuously reminds us of the salvation that God has offered to human beings. God invites all humans to be saved and invites everyone to salvation in Jesus Christ. God through Jesus Christ has offered salvation to everyone - everyone is invited to be saved and this offer of God's salvation for every person is extended to each and every person. Everyone has received God's communication and invitation to be saved - each one is free to accept or to refuse this offer of salvation in Jesus. All this is offered through the Word of God - communicated in the Church. That is why, we have said that the Word of God is the continuous offer of salvation to the world and to everyone.

In addition, the Word of God is the reminder of eschatological events that will take place at the

end of time. It is a reminder of the last days - a reminder of the continuing invitation to live holy and good lives, so that at the end of our lives we may all be saved. It is a continuous offer of salvation in the *eschaton*. When our life ends here on earth, we will come face to face with our Lord Jesus Christ - he will judge each one according to our deeds. This invitation is extended to each one of us through the Word of God - read and proclaimed in Church. This invitation is given to each one so that we can be ready to greet our Lord and meet our fate when our life here on earth ends. This is the invitation that Jesus Christ gives to each one of us as we live our life here on earth.

The fact that the Word is in principle exhibitive means that it influences and renders the present that it signifies. This exhibitive character of the Word, transcends different faith confessions. The Church pronounces the Word, and this pronouncement of the Word is given and done at the command and behest of God and Christ. The basis for the communication and proclamation of the Word is Jesus Christ - who commanded the disciples to go out and preach - to communicate the Word of God. This communication is not limited to a particular individual, but to everyone - precisely because the Kingdom of God is extended to each and every person regardless of who they are.

Mention should also be made here of the fact that the Word pronounced has different levels and different status. For example, the Word that just gives information about groundnuts that are dug or crushed is not of the same status as the Word that tells the penitent that their sins are forgiven!

Furthermore, the importance of the Word can also be manifested in the fact that the Word forms an important aspect of the sacraments. Each sacrament has not only the matter of the

sacrament, but also the formula of the sacrament which in general circumstances refers to the Word pronounced. This is clear from the seven sacraments. At Baptism, Eucharist, Confession and other sacraments, there are words – the formula of the sacrament. All this shows the importance of the Word – the importance of the effect that accrues from the Word. The Word is not just some empty thing – not just some empty formula – but the Word is exhibitive and effects what it signifies. If one says, your sins are forgiven – they are really forgiven. If one says, I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – they are really baptised! This is the efficacy of the Word – the Word effects what is proclaimed and pronounced. As such, the sacrament is a specific word-event.

The Word is also Christ Jesus – Jesus is the Word of the Father. Jesus is the fulfilment of everything that the prophetic tradition predicted and prophesied. Jesus is the ultimate Word – after which there is nothing more to be said that can help the human person to be saved. For all that preceded Christ and all that is said about Him afterwards points to Christ as the saviour of the world. He revealed God. He is God made man. He is the Son of God. He is the perfect mediator through whom God has spoken, and all that He said was confirmed by the Holy Spirit – all through the apostolic tradition and in the age of the Church.

The Word spoken, proclaimed and communicated through Christ is transported to the age of the Church in which every baptised person is called upon to become a proclaimer – a communicator of good news. This communication of good news does not end with the proclamation, but points to the *eschaton* – to the beatific vision – to communion with God. The Church is the custodian of the Word – the proclaimer and the interpreter of the Word of God.

Men and women, who were filled by the Holy Spirit – authored the bible and this is the basis of divine and human authorship of the bible. The Church collected together into a single book – the bible – different writings and put them together – bound together a holy book. This book is not just a book in the ordinary sense of the word – but it is the bible – it is the Word of God. The different books did not just come about – they

were not just chosen or included in the bible by personal choice or whims, but they went through a rigorous process – the canon – in order to establish the authenticity, apostolicity and orthodoxy of the writings. The Church that brought together the different writings – is also the same Church that is the ultimate interpreter of the Word of God – so that scripture is not misinterpreted, but properly interpreted to foster and build the faith of those who read it.

The bible as it is – it is not a historical book – it is not a book of Geography! That is why, if someone goes and reads the bible looking for Historical, Geographical or Mathematical proofs, they will be disappointed because the bible is not that, it is not a book for historical, geographical or mathematical proofs – the bible is a book of faith. It is a book of how God has communicated and revealed himself in history, through Adamic times, through the Patriarchs, Mosaic times, all through the prophets and eventually through Jesus Christ. It is a book of how Jesus sent out the disciples to go out and preach to the end of times. All this has eternal consequences – the beatific vision – where we will see God face to face. This is faith – our faith – and if one goes to the bible to read about the faith – he will find it there, but if one goes and reads the bible looking for other proofs – he will not find them there. The bible is a book of faith! It is the Word of God – the God we proclaim – we proclaim Him so that we can believe in him – believing so that we can be saved!

The Word of God is in the bible. This assertion is generally agreed by the Catholic and Protestant Theologians. The difference however is that as the Protestants talk about *Sola scriptura* – the Catholic Theologians believe that God has not only revealed himself through the written Word of God, but that God has also revealed himself through the unwritten word – and that is the tradition of the Church. This finds basis in scripture itself when John writes – there is much more that Jesus did which has not been written – and if all was to be written there would be no book big enough to contain everything. That is why, Catholics have some things like the tradition of some prayers, tradition of wearing the rosary and several other traditions which may not have been written in the bible, but they have been passed on through tradition.

We may thus surmise, that the Word of God is in scripture, but also in tradition. Ultimately, the Word of God is not only in scripture or tradition, but the Word of God is embodied – embodied in Jesus the Son of God – He is the Word – the Word of God that has come among us. The Word is embodied in Emmanuel – God with us. That is why as a Communication Theologian, I can grant that the Word, not only has it been communicated through Scripture, sacraments, tradition, revelation but finally the Word has been communicated through Jesus Christ. This is the embodiment of the Word of God. Through each of those forms of communication of the Word – God has given His graces to the humans, in order to help them to be saved. This is the exhibitiv character of the Word!

## **2. COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL IN THE MEDIA NETWORKS A 'USES AND GRATIFICATION' THEORY APPROACH**

At the outset, it is important that we briefly understand the 'uses and gratification' theory which is the perspective through which we would like to look at today's society and how the society would like to use the media. The 'uses and gratification' theory basically states that people choose the media that they want to use according to the gratification that may accrue from it or according to the use of the media. Basically, the theory also referred to as UGT focusses on the audience and asks a very fundamental question: what do people do with the media? What use does it have for them? What is the significance of the media? In this approach therefore, it is not just what the media will do for the people as of what use is the media for the people. The approach of uses and gratification answers an important and basic question: what do we do with the media? Of what use is the media? What need does the media satisfy in the lives of the people?

This theory was propagated by two scholars namely Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail. In the year 1964, these two scholars observed different audiences and then finished out the motivations, purposes, aims and objectives that propelled the

people to watch political campaigns. The same could be said about different people who listen to different television stations, radio stations, web sites and different communication networks. Why do people tune in to such radio stations? Why do people tune in to different communication channels and networks? The temptation usually is to begin from top to down, but this is a down to top approach. In this approach, the beginning and starting point is to listen to the people at first. Why do they listen and tune in to a particular programme, particular radio station, particular television station, and why do they tune in to a particular communication channel or network? Or indeed why do people surf on a particular website? Why do they go on a particular website? To do what? For what use? For what gratification? This is the Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail communicational theory of 'uses and gratification'. People enter communication networks and channels for gratification. This gratification comes in different forms and different ways. People are gratified through music, folktales, interesting news items, and several other items that interest and gratify them. This would be related to the function of the media as encapsulated in the three functions of entertaining, informing and educating. The media entertains people through different ways.

Entertainment is an important ingredient of human life and the people that are not entertained are deprived of something that is really important for them. Entertainment is essential and relaxation or rest to use the biblical term is important. That is why God, worked for six days and rested on the seventh day. He rested and that is why we too have taken the seventh day as a day of prayer and rest. We rest by relaxing and getting entertainment. People also access the media because of education. Education is an important ingredient of human life. This education is done through educative programs, on radios, newspapers and televisions, as well as web pages. It is in this context that education takes place so that people can get better ideas, that people can be helped to understand things in a better way and so that people are assisted to see things in the right perspective. People also access the media for information. Information is given through different ways. People are

informed about different things and items. After getting these three things, information, education and entertainment, the individual becomes satisfied and gratified. As we did point out at the beginning, the temptation is for the big media organisations and institutions to spell out the uses of the media for the people who consume the media – but they too should have a chance to say why they like a particular type of media, a particular communication channel, a particular presentation of news or a particular way of accessing the word of God. That is what the uses and gratification theory says: it is the consumers who can express what they like by accessing the media, what type of media and in what type of form – that is why feedback from the media consumers is an important ingredient. What do many people or listeners or viewers say about a particular way of communicating? Do they like it or not? If they do not like it - what do they want to be changed? That is why, we have a discipline called Communication Research!

In the modern era and especially with the introduction of Web 2.0, we have a platform that encourages a lot of creativity, but also interaction. People can ask a question and someone can answer straightaway on the same internet page. Someone can raise a point and people can together agree or disagree. This is interaction and Web 2.0 provides such a wonderful opportunity for interaction. Interaction is a process of socialising – those who are alone find themselves chatting with someone else – those who cannot walk find a Facebook friend – those who can't talk find someone with whom they can exchange messages and still have a chance to express their thoughts – an old woman who lives alone can still interact with her Church community on the parish WhatsApp page – a lonely person can communicate with someone – the sick can still listen to the word of God through audio or video – those who are so old that they can't even sit in the Church pews can still read the Word of God on their phones and in spirit remain united with the parish community at the Church – the parish priest can on the phone answer a question of a timid boy or girl who is afraid to personally meet the parish priest and ask him about the origins of the Eucharist! These are the positive sides of the media – thanks in a

special way to Web 2.0. The danger is to be afraid of the media – to fear making mistakes on the media – to be afraid of creating superstars on the media – to prefer a 'careful Church' – 'a cautious Church,' a Church that restricts itself to the Church building where it is safe – but in the paraphrased words of Pope Francis – the Church should never be afraid because we carry with us good news!

Good news ought to penetrate there – in the media – or should we give up the media space and just leave it to the insulting items that sometime populate it? The Word of God, must reach there – the Word of God must be present there so that those who are addicted to these platforms can find there also the Word of God – that word that heals, that word that consoles, that word that inspires and that word that encourages them never to give up going to Church – the word that invites them to come again to Church the next Sunday and to keep reminding them even there – on the mass media. Unfortunately, as we have stated in other writings – the Church cannot run away from mass media – that is why the Vatican has a radio station, television station – Pope Francis is on tweeter – daily tweets @Pontifex! I happened to be in Rome when the Pope sent the first message on Twitter and the media publicity that the event carried with it was phenomenal – the highest authority in the Church entering and joining the tweeting community!

Of particular importance here is Wilbur Schramm who, in 1954, discovered that people seek out a particular form of media, not only because of the use and gratification that may accrue from it, but also because of the simplicity in accessibility. We have looked already at some of the uses and gratification that may accrue from the media, but it is important to realise that people do not just use the media because of its usefulness or utility, but also because of its simplicity in accessing it. For example, someone may be sick in a hospital and if he has a phone, he can use *WhatsApp* to access the word of God. It does not mean that a priest has not preached at Church, but the priest is not accessible to this person dying – but the word of God on the phone is accessible in this particular moment. Or someone on a bus or travelling, and is not in the context of the

Church building – he or she may want to access the word of God, as he or she travels – she or he may not even have a book on the word of God, but may have a phone – on WhatsApp, on the website, on the social media, he or she may access the word of God. The media in this case is accessed in order to satisfy the need and hunger for the word of God. Someone in an office park, having worked the whole day, is relaxing for thirty minutes before resuming work again – may want to read, know and reflect on that day’s word of God – it is there on their cell phones – on the internet, on the web, on the radio! That is why smart phones with all the media convergence are of a great help for many people.

In this case, one accesses the media not only because of the above listed reasons – but because of the simplicity of accessing the items that is there – just there – it is in the pocket – it can be handled in the hands, it is not complicated at all; it is easy – it is accessible. That is why people use the media in the thought of Wilbur Schramm not only for the uses and gratifications of their choice but also, they use them because of the simplicity of accessibility.

In my view, I can submit that the strength of the ‘uses and gratifications’ theory is that it brings out an important element, namely, that people make choices about the kind of media that they consume. We have so many radios today, so many television stations, so many newspapers, so many books, so much literature, so many websites! Why do people choose a particular type of media to consume? Why choose this type of radio or television and not that other one? Why choose this website and not that one? Why do many people listen to radios and televisions etc.? It is because a particular type of media satisfies their need. It is because a particular radio gratifies them and they find it useful for what they do. If somebody runs a business – he will like a radio that broadcasts business tips – if someone is interested in Vatican issues, he will tune in to Vatican radio – if someone wants current news, he will not tune in to a radio that only plays music and has no news – and if someone wants local and traditional items, he will tune in to such radios. What ‘use and gratification’ does the communication channel satisfy? What need

does it respond to? Why does it exist? Again the danger is that the media companies are the first to give the answers and responses – but it is the people – the audience the listeners – who must say what they need – what they want their radio, television, newspaper or website to be like and to what it must respond! This process needs continuous assessment because the terrain keeps changing, the needs keep developing, and the situation on the ground keeps changing as well. As a society and as a Church, we have to keep updating ourselves with the needs on the ground – the Church in the modern world – the Church to the world – a world of the media – a world of Facebook, a world of WhatsApp, a world of Twitter, a world of Imo, a world of radios, televisions, newspapers and websites! How prepared are we as a Church to face such a world? As a Communication Theologian, I can grant that there is no way we can run away from the media. We need to have the audacity to communicate the gospel in these communication channels because we carry with us the good news of salvation. There are so many people in these news channels. There are billions and billions of people in these communication networks and the least we could ever do is to flee the social networks – we have to infiltrate the communication networks with the word of God in order to support the faith of those who already believe and to seek the conversion of those who do not yet know Christ!

### **3. COMMUNICATION THEOLOGY AND INCLUSIVITY IN MISSION**

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The Church has over the centuries had situations that have been difficult. One of such situations is that of religious pluralism. The Church has generally been open towards the reality of religious plurality, and also towards people of other faiths and it has usually engaged them on different topics. While this was usually done, it still remains a challenge to be accomplished and fully achieved.

The Church understands the existence of such situations not just through acknowledgment that there is religious pluralism, but the Church also

continues to preach the truth of the faith to people of different faiths and denominations. That is very clear from the Church's documents and writings.

That is why, the Vatican II documents talk about the Church in the modern world – that the Church is tailored towards reaching out to people of other faiths and denominations. This means that the way of preaching and the way of communicating the Gospel takes a universal approach and an inclusive approach. It is an approach that includes participation and reaching out to people of different faiths.

As a matter of fact, it is unlikely that religious pluralism, which is a reality today especially in the lives of the people and in the concrete life of Christians, will go away. By religious pluralism we mean the existence of so many religions including those who deny religion and mystery in general. It includes everyone who denies the importance of religion and also denies that God and mystery in general does exist. The idea also includes the existence of so many faiths, Churches, beliefs and those who deny it in general. All this is religious pluralism which represents the basis of one's existence. It is in this sense that everyone is basically religious – with some affirming existence of God while others not affirming it. All this is religious pluralism.

This reality is hard to accept especially for those of us who believe in the one and true Church of Christ, but as we said, it is a reality that is there! And in this paper, we clearly state that the inclusivity of mission and preaching may help in addressing the situation.

We however have to be cautious so that we do not find ourselves in an extreme position of religious relativism. We cannot deny the importance of the Church. The Church is important and necessary for salvation. We need the Church for salvation. Nevertheless, every human being is disposed to God's self-communication and that means that each one of us is an event of God's self-communication. As event of God's self-communication, each one can be saved – each one is invited to God's offer of salvation.

Nevertheless, even if Christianity is necessary for salvation, it is not right to say that all those

who are outside Christianity are not events of God's self-communication. This would not be true. In fact, the grace of God indeed does extend to those outside the confines of Christianity because every human being is an event of God's self-communication, but unfortunately some people refuse to accept God's offer of salvation.

The offer of God's salvation and God's self-communication is extended to everyone and no one is forced to accept it. It is offered freely and the response is also free. It is offered to people of all denominations and to people of all faiths. It is extended and offered to everyone and no one is forced to respond in a specific way.

Having said that, the Church encourages conversions to it especially for those who freely decide to join it. Those who can convert include the people of other denominations. Such efforts towards new conversions are important because the Church is indeed necessary for salvation. However, such an assertion should be pursued with respect also for those who do not explicitly profess the faith. This does not mean condoning unbelief or paganism or non-catholicity, but it means encouraging conversion in a manner that is not disrespectful.

In terms of preaching and kerygma, this has serious implications. The approach is that of really reaching out, breaking through the usual barriers and boundaries to the areas and situations that need preaching and that need the word of God. It also means being able to reach out to as many people as possible and this means having the capacity to reach out to many people through the mass media.

It also means making use of the radio stations, making use of newspapers, making use of as many means of mass communication as are available and are possible. Pope Francis has already shown us the way in the way he interacted with so many people during his papacy. From the way he interacted with journalists, to the way he interacted with people in St. Peter's square, all through his speeches, messages and conferences, the Pope broke through to reach to everyone through different ways and different means. He broke through by being there for the less privileged.

All this shows the importance of the public ministry of the Church – reaching out to people

and communicating the good news to people. It is not enough to believe and keep it to oneself – faith has to be shared – faith has to be communicated and the Church does this by reaching out to as many people as possible –by

preaching and reaching out in a manner that is inclusive – to the ends of the earth!

**For bibliographical references please address the author.**