Leadership Communication at Jesus' Baptism

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This essay will explore the elements of leadership communication, specifically from the discourse perspective, through the story of Jesus baptism in the Gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in the New Testament. Viewing the narrative of Jesus' baptism from a discourse perspective offers a new lens in which communication is moved from a practice to a phenomenon. Following the Socio-Rhetorical approach outlined by Robbins an intertexture analysis of the story reveals that leadership communication highlights: the necessity of social relationships, the importance of community, and dynamic interaction in the leader-follower dyad. Suggestions are included which can be used in the modern church and in ongoing ministry for individuals and organizations.

Christian Communication at Jesus Baptism

Professor of Communication John Durham Peters notes that "'Communication'…is sooner a matter of faith and risk than of technique and method" With this quote a perspective of the communication process is offered that mirrors a theology of communication in the Bible. Communication is "one of the characteristic concepts of the twentieth century." While the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle dubbed humans the 'speaking animals' it wasn't until the turn of the twentieth century that serious study of 'communication' began.[1] Unfortunately and too often during its history the academic field has theorized and researched the *practice* of communication over explaining the *phenomenon* of communication.[2] The recent rise of the discourse perspective within the communication literature has re-focused the conversation from a practice to a phenomenon. Professor Linda Putnam comments that the discourse perspective "decenters means-end function of communication and privileges the role of conversation in developing community."[3] An understanding of communication through the lens of the discourse perspective offers a new understanding of effective and Christian communication in the aspects of community, relationships, and the roles of leaders and followers as found in the New Testament story of Jesus' baptism.

Theology of Effective and Christian Communication

Sometimes the best communication theory resembles theology.[4] In a very basic sense human communication can be boiled down to two perspectives: transaction or transmission. The transaction view of communication is focused on one-way communication in which the sender is paramount. For example radio disc jockeys work under a one-way paradigm. Even a status update on Facebook may be considered a one-way vehicle for communication. The transmission view of communication involves two-way communication and typically has a goal of shared meaning between the participants. This essay explores communication from the transmission view, the discourse perspective. Fore suggests it is important to explore both areas of communication to develop a competent theology of communication and "its role as a part of everything, of all of being, and also how it functions in everyday life."[5] Additionally the mystery of human communication can be examined from the *practice* of communication and what is said or not said but also from the *phenomenon* of communication and why certain elements within the communication process occurred or did not occur. The focus of this essay is on the mystery to human communication that is discovered when examining the discourse perspective. For example as a professor why does the same lecture in two separate classes bore one class so that students can't wait to exit and in the other class make a life-long impact? As a husband why does saying the same thing at two different times create opposite reactions? For believers at a basic level human communication is a mystery that can only be explained through God. "The fact is that all human communication depends on God's grace."[6] At a starting point an emphasis must be placed on the understanding that without the grace of God all communication trends toward entropy and simply falls apart. The discourse perspective relies on the social interaction process of the actors involved.

The big or capital "D" of Discourse is different than the small "d" of discourse in that discourse focuses on the language while Discourse is the way "understanding is produced and reproduced."[7] According to Gail Fairhurst discourse is "a historically rooted constellation of ideas, assumptions, and talk patterns that, in effect, become linguistic resources for communicating actors."[8] This phenomenon is done through the social interaction process in which the focus is on the sociality or the interactions that take place within a specific time and context.

Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar comment that the shift to a social constructivist approach is not new and actually has been in process for all of recorded history. All that constitutes 'knowledge' today evolved from various perspectives in the past. New knowledge is shared through a social network of interactions. At the heart of social networks is an understanding of how and why relationships are built, specifically within the leader – follower dyad.[9] In the story of Jesus' baptism a specific focus will be on the social interactions between John the Baptist and Jesus, between Jesus and God, and the interaction of the Trinity through the work of God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The fundamental philosophy utilized in this essay stem from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and the relationships that exist within the social interactions and the theory of dialogics. As outlined by Littlejohn and Foss Bakhtin's Theory of dialogics is "how individuals, cultures, and even language construct an integrated whole when there are so many things operating that work against a sense of order."[10] This is similar to the discourse perspective of communication. Bakhtin views dialogue as a fundamental form of human communication and "a special form of interaction."[11] Compared with the traditional perspective of Platonic communication in which many voices display one idea or thought in a series or row, Bakhtin's dialogue is polyphonic in which "every voice presents its own unique idea." Additionally synthesis is the goal of Platonic

dialogue while dialogue in a Bakhtin sense offers that every voice is involved in the event. Nikulin also suggests that this form of dialogue is also represented in biblical dialogue between the Trinity and in the ongoing communication of the Holy Spirit. Using Baxter's Theory of Relationships dialogue and discourse are connected so that ultimately the Discourse that occurs "refers to the idea that the practical and aesthetic outcomes are not things-in-themselves but are made, or created, in communication." Ultimately the message of Discourse from the Bakhtinian sense of the word is that "Discourse… is ongoing – an unending conversation – which makes relationships unfinalizable." Thus dialogue becomes an important part of the Discourse process in which the phenomenon of the relationships between the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), Jesus and John the Baptist, and the Father and Son are understood.

Research Question

Creswell notes that in qualitative methods a research question must have a central question that poses the large topic for exploration and several sub-questions that relate back to the broad focus. The goal with this approach is to "explore the complex set of factors surrounding the central phenomenon and present the varied perspectives or meanings." [12] The purpose of this research is to explore the differences between effective and Christian communication in the story of Jesus' baptism through the aspects of: community, relationships and the roles of leaders and followers. With the previous review the following research questions are suggested:

RQ1 – How does effective communication differ from Christian communication as seen through the discourse perspective?

RQ_{1a} – What is the impact of relationships on communication as seen through the story of Jesus' baptism?

RQ_{1b} – What is the impact of community on communication as seen through the story of Jesus' baptism?

RQ_{1c} – What is the role of the leader in the discourse perspective of communication as seen through the story of Jesus' baptism?

RQ_{1d} – What is the role of the follower in the discourse perspective of communication as seen through the story of Jesus' baptism?

Intertexture Analysis of Jesus' Baptism

Intertexture analysis is when the "interpreter works in the area between the author and the text" and involve the areas of: 1) oral-scribal, 2) historical, 3) social, and 4) cultural. [13] This methodology is optimum because of the relationships and descriptions narrated in the four distinct gospels of Matthew 3:13 – 17, Mark 1: 9 – 11, Luke 3: 21 – 22, and the brief call of John the Baptist as evidenced in John 1: 32 – 34. This analysis will specifically use the sub-text of social intertexture analysis which has been defined as "the use, reference, or representation of various forms of social knowledge." Social knowledge is gained by individuals, groups, and organizations in the day to day interactions of the various contexts and situations.

Matthew 3 contains the primary passage in the four gospels that narrate the baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River by John the Baptist. The four verses in Matthew 3 state:

[13] Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. [14] But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need you to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" [15] Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. [16] As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. [17] And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"

"The historicity of Jesus' baptism by John is virtual certainty." [14] But what is the meaning of the baptism for Jesus, for John, and for modern day believers? Various understandings of the baptism are forwarded by scholars. Freeman suggests the majority opinion that Jesus' baptism at the Jordan is the beginning of his public ministry. [15] Gibbs offers the alternative viewpoint that in this passage "Jesus at his baptism is the Servant of Yahweh by referencing the Old Testament scripture found in Isaiah 42:1. [16] While this aspect is important to consider the communication elements are a focus for this essay.

Three primary communication events highlight the baptism of Jesus in the scriptures. The first interaction occurs between John and Jesus. The two cousins, related by birth and family blood connect at the Jordan River. John is already a popular figure and has been in ministry paving the way for the coming king. Jesus is just beginning his public ministry and as told in Mark, immediately after the baptism, Jesus is taken away to the desert for forty days where he is tempted. A second communicative event is the work of the Trinity. Jesus obeys his Father and is baptized, the scripture makes the point that "As soon as Jesus was baptized" (vs. 16) the Holy Spirit communicated to Jesus by descending and lighting on him. Then a voice from heaven booms over the landscape. "This is my son, whom I love with him I am well pleased" (vs. 17). The third communication event highlighted in the baptism of Jesus centers on the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In all three of the biblical passages the three separate elements combine as one in the perfect work of the Trinity.

The communication events in the gospel of Mark differ just slightly from those in John. A small change in the actual words that God says to Jesus is seen in the NIV version of the Bible. Instead of using 'him' God is recorded as saying, "With you I am well pleased" (Mark 1: 11). Freeman comments that though the wording is different in the two passages and there is a slight shift from the second person to third person, "most scholars see no significant shift in meaning." [17]

The Lukan narrative account of Jesus' baptism also uses the 'you' when spoken by God but slightly shifts the focus and details of the story. Luke comments that "And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him n bodily form like a dove" (vs. 22). Webb comments that "it is quite evident that Matthew and Luke have used Mark in constructing their accounts of Jesus' baptism." [18] In all of these accounts concepts can be surmised that help modern day believers understand the role of effective and Christian communication including the importance or relationships, the importance of community, and the role of leaders and followers.

Discussion and Summary

Lawrence comments on and lists seven distinctive traits of Christian leaders. Included among the list is distinctiveness in regard to: position, character requirements, source, enablement, ambition, motivation, and ultimate authority. [19] On the basis of the social subtext of the intertexture analysis the baptism of Jesus at

the Jordan River offers suggestions that enable Christian leaders but also enable effective and Christian communication.

Stemming from the concept of social interaction and construction, relationships play a pivotal role in communication. Three social relationships were highlighted: Jesus and John the Baptist, Jesus and God, and the Trinity. Boyer comments on the importance of Trinitarian discourse by emphasizing the indwelling of all three together. This concept is seen clearer in the doctrines of perichoresis and the "intimacy of this union gives rise in virtually all Christian traditions." [20] The social interactions and developing relationships are important in a discourse perspective of effective and Christian communication. Modern believers will never reach the level of perichoresis as seen in the Trinity but must try.

Nouwen comments on the importance of community when he says that "Christian leaders are called to live the Incarnation, that is, to live in the body, not only in their own bodies, but in the body of the community, and to discover there the presence of the Holy Spirit." [21] The element of community is highlighted in Jesus' baptism with the work of the Trinity but also in the relationship between John and Jesus. The two relatives worked together in a Christian community as Jesus began his three year ministry.

Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor examined the role of followership in the leader – follower dyad and found that the concept of followership is almost a 'mirror' image of leadership. Stemming from a social construction perspective the researchers tried to find the elements and actions that constitute this phenomenon. They discovered three specific areas "Followers defined their role around passivity, obedience, and deference, while others saw their role as largely proactive and participate." [22] In the communication between John the Baptist and Jesus the narrative in the Gospel of John points towards an appropriate followership role. John argued with Jesus about the baptism and after listening to Jesus' explanation the verse says that "Then John consented" (vs. 15). Effective and Christian communication highlight the proper roles of leaders and followers in the discourse so that ongoing meanings of different social participants can be recognized.

Schultze recognizes that all communication, whether it is effective or distinctively Christian, belongs to God. The almighty Creator provides his "gift of communication to equip us to represent the Creator on earth" [23] and whenever we communicate we are able to have a small taste of heaven.

Endnotes

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