

God has Spoken in the Son: Communication and Communion  
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In many and diverse ways long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken in the Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom God also made the worlds, who being the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's being, bearing all things by his powerful word, having been made purification for sins, sat down at the right hand of the Great One on High, having become as much superior to the angels as more excellent than them, he inherited the name. (Hebrews 1: 1-4).

What does it mean to say, "God has spoken in the Son," and what has this to do with our discipleship? Let me offer a simple answer and then develop its significance. God's speaking in the Son communicates such that it draws those who hear it into a unity, a unity that should characterize their worship, doctrine and ethics. God's communication, in other words, creates communion, a common unity affecting all those means that allow us to communicate with each other – including language, sex and economics. How we think and speak about one of these, will necessarily affect how we think and speak about the others; for all of these are means of communication God has given to us in order to communicate God's own being to us. Such a communication is also an invitation to communicate in the lives of each other. So there is the simple answer. Let me now try to explain what I mean by it and why it might be significant, beginning with the statement "in these last days God has spoken in the Son?" When I read these words in this setting, they already communicated something. The very reading and hearing of them both presumes a common unity and in turn furthers that communion. We can readily name the conditions that make this possible.

1. We are all creatures.

First, we are all English speakers, which is rather trivial but not unimportant. We have to be located somewhere and able to speak a language in order to communicate. We could all hear what I read because we are located in space and time. I doubt if anyone was confused when I was reading out loud from this technological apparatus known as a book. There may have been a time when that was confusing, but it is intelligible to us. (Recent example at annual conference where a woman delivered her address from a phone – confess I was confused at first.) We share a common practice of reading and hearing.

While our creatureliness is necessary for communication, it is also insufficient. It makes for miscommunication as much as communication. Perhaps you were dozing off as I read this important passage, or you

were thinking about something else – your mind was wandering. Maybe you are in the back of the room and the acoustics are not so good. Things get misheard and need to be clarified, like that scene from Monty Python’s Life of Brian where Brian’s followers are too far removed from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount to get it right. One says, “Did he say blessed are the cheese makers?” To which another responds, in good historical critical fashion, “yes but he did not mean for it to be taken literally, he meant everyone in the dairy industry.” That we are specific language speakers located in space and time, is a condition for communication, but it is insufficient. For it is also a condition for miscommunication. Something more is necessary for true communication. Of course, true communication assumes truth. One of the conditions for communicating is the assumption that our language tells the truth. This is less a historical, contingent feature of language – as if it could be other – but a necessary feature. It is written into the fabric of creation, which God established by speaking it through the Word who is Truth. If language is to be a means of communication, then it must, as Deb noted earlier drawing on Wendell Berry – have as its purpose and its beginning – truth.

As Deb noted, we read the creation account in Genesis through the eternal Wisdom who is Jesus. This raises another essential condition for our communication: we are baptized creatures, members of Christ’s body, seeking to be his disciples, and that brings with it common commitments. If we did not receive them, communication would be impossible. This passage from Hebrews communicates because it does not originate from us. Yes we publish it. We distribute it. We read it. We also have faith that in these material words produced, distributed and read something more is present, which cannot be indicated simply by pointing to the context of production, distribution, speaking or reading. That ‘more’ is ‘the Word of the Lord.’ In diverse and sundry ways, we have all been taught this. In my church, we do it by processing the Scripture into worship with great ceremony. When we read it we say, ‘This is the Word of God.’ People respond, “Thanks be to God.” That always strikes me as odd and as something mysterious. You couldn’t get away with saying such things about any other book. It also gives me hope. Sometimes we do reduce Scripture to nothing more than an object to be gazed upon without attending to what it asks of us, but the fact that this Word still has a hold on us is a sign of hope not to be discounted.

Scripture has a certain authority for us, which we can only receive. I would go so far as to say it enchants us. It is unlike any other book. This requires an intentional act on our part. David McCarthy tells a story about his undergraduate OT professor who began their class by taking the Bible, throwing it on the ground and stomping on it. I guess the point was to say it is not the ‘thing’ itself that is sacred but what it bears

witness to. But we already live in a disenchanting world where the attempt (always unsuccessful) is made to level every site and time and place it on a grid with every other. Why should we contribute to the flattening of all space and time by refusing to see in the thing itself something sacred worthy of honor? The common life that makes possible God's communication requires holy objects, sacred places, sites and times that unite us so that we recognize our common bonds. Without them, we are more likely to miscommunicate than communicate. Wordcare and discipleship require that we give attention to these objects, sites and places. If we do not, then we will have abandoned the materiality of the Word.

If God is found in the flesh of Christ, should we not avoid the Gnostic temptation to think God is somehow found by abstracting from ordinary, fleshly realities? This is essential to recognize what it means to say, in these last days God has spoken in the Son. God speaks in a specific time: "in these last days." God also speaks through a specific means. Hebrews emphasizes that God speaks in and through the flesh, the concrete materiality of the Son. This is why it says that for God to speak in the Son, he "had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (2: 17). This "fleshes out" for us (pun intended) the common meaning of the statement, "God has spoken in the Son." Yet the "specific time" in which God speaks is also eternal. It is not only a historical contextualized time. It is the "last days," which is also the "Today" Hebrews reminds us is the eternal in the temporal like the holy of holies found in the tabernacle where God's glory, the beauty of holiness, resides. There is a beauty to God's speech that must be seen before it can be heard, an indestructible beauty. It should be embodied in the architecture of our churches - by that I mean the buildings, but also its worship, its teaching, and in the lives of those who constitute it.

Nietzsche recognized that as we lose God we lose the transcendent beauty of material objects, the eternal in the temporary, that God communicates to us. He once wrote, "If belief in . . . heavenly truth declines in general, then that species of art can never flourish again which - like the Divine Comedy, the paintings of Raphael, the frescos of Michelangelo, the Gothic cathedrals - presupposes not only a cosmic but a metaphysical significance in the objects of art. A moving tale will one day be told how there once existed such an art, such an artist's faith." But Nietzsche's tale is a miscommunication. It does not tell well what we already know, what we just experienced by the communion the words of Hebrews make possible. If God communicates, then the places and times of that communication will possess a beauty we are obligated to honor. They cannot be reduced to the hideous, even when they are destroyed for they are God's communication to us. Was this not true of the tabernacle,

the ark of the covenant, the Temple, its liturgy and priesthood and even the flesh of Christ? Although they are destroyed, they continue to speak just like Abel's sacrifice?

The materiality of God's word, through creation is beautiful. When God speaks it is unlike all other speaking. The Jewish exegete Philo offers some help here. He wrote, "God is not like a man, in need of a mouth, and of a tongue, and of a windpipe, but as it seems to me, he at that time wrought a most conspicuous and evidently holy miracle, commanding an invisible sound to be created in the air, more marvelous than all the instruments that ever existed, attuned to perfect harmonies; and that not an inanimate one. . . ." For Philo God's Word is not inanimate but animate. It creates and creation is material. The embodied character of God's miraculous word is found in the flaming fire.<sup>1</sup> It is the creaturely means of God's communication, and that communication can be seen as readily as it can be heard. Philo says it must be seen before it is heard. Here he draws upon the story of the burning bush that first catches Moses' eye before he can hear God speak. The Church fathers of course, loved this. It is one of the reasons why they drew so heavily on Philo – because of his emphasis on the materiality of the Word. Was this not fulfilled in the Son? "God has spoken in the Son," and in that speaking we not only hear, but we also see. God's Word is so substantial that it not only can be heard, but it must be seen. God's Word is the most substantial thing in all of creation; everything else is insubstantial in comparison. It is the "corner stone" on which it is all constructed. As Hebrews reminds us, "But we do see Jesus."

2. Christology: Hebrews – "But we do see Jesus." God speaks in the Son. Who he is and what he does are both essential if we are to see and hear God speak. He is the one who bears the Name. If he did not, we would be idolaters. My wife ran the oncology unit at our local hospital in Skokie where she works with many Orthodox Jews. One of them became her friend and they finally became close enough that her friend asked her, 'What don't you keep the commandments?' Taken aback, she said what do you mean? You violate the first two commandments – you worship Jesus who is a man, a creaturely form. My wife tried to explain to her that this was not the case because of the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and Christology. But it is an important question. Her friend was right to raise it, and my wife was right in her response. The common teachings we have of the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology are not some speculative exercises that seek to authorize an unwarranted Greek

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<sup>1</sup> Philo, "For the truth is that the voice of men is calculated to be heard; but that of God to be really and truly seen. Why is this? Because all that God says are not words, but actions which the eye determine on before the ears." (Philo, pp. 521-2).

metaphysics and need to be revised in every generation. They are the language that makes possible the most central act of Christian discipleship, without which nothing else makes sense. Those of us responsible for teaching, preaching or writing neglect this common language at our peril for it helps us sustain the central act of Christian discipleship without which nothing else makes sense: We bow the knee to Jesus within the context of a shared understanding with Judaism as to who God is. We pray “Hear O Israel the Lord our God is One.” And we must express that in our language. We also pray “In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” and that too must be expressed. Our communication makes no sense without the doctrine of the Trinity. We do this because we worship Jesus. The truly human Jesus is worshipped and glorified, but we do this without confusing divinity and humanity. Jesus is a single acting subject (what we call the hypostatic union) who acts in a fully human and divine nature. When I speak to clergy I often ask them: how many of you could explain the hypostatic union? A few hands go up. Then I ask, how many know your Myers–Briggs test score. Every hand goes up. This says something about the ‘miscommunication’ rampant in our churches today. The common language that binds us together is not the language of the faith, and that has implications for our discipleship. If we know how to use the language of the “Myers–Briggs” better than that of the common language of the Church, then of course we will not be able to act or speak well of the God who has spoken in the Son.

To know God, “who has spoken to us in the Son,” we must share in common a language about God. This is not prescriptive; it is descriptive. It is what has to be for the communication to take place. It is as true of everyday life as it is of our own names (Duane). We find our common language of God in Scripture, and especially the first three commandments given to Moses:

1. ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me.’
2. ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.’
3. ‘You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name’ (Exodus 21: 1–7, NRSV).

The beauty of these commandments is that they instruct us in what can and cannot be said about God. The first commandment tells us that God acts, the second that God is not a creature, and the third that God’s name must not be used to express vain and empty things. From these wonderful gifts we share the ability and obligation to recognize what it does and does not mean to say, “God has spoken in the Son.” For

instance, if having heard this read someone sincerely asked, “does God then have a mouth?,” we would know that we have miscommunicated, that we do not share in communion. This violates the second commandment. It should not keep us from speaking about God. We know it is permissible to say, ‘God is a rock’ or ‘God is a friend.’ We would all recognize, I trust, it would be impermissible to say, ‘God is that rock,’ or ‘God is my friend Bob.’

The first commandment requires that we speak of God. God acts in history. To know the God who communicates in the Son is to meet God in this history. It is to receive God’s Name as one of our greatest gifts. . This name is a ‘sacred possession’ entrusted to Israel – “I am what I am” (ehyeh asher ehyeh). It is the same Name I believe– and here I would agree with Richard Bauckham – that is given to Jesus in this opening sentence in Hebrews – he inherited the Name. If we do not know what “the Name” is, we cannot know this God who speaks. God is to be, the great I AM. God is the fullness of being, lacking nothing. We stand in a tradition that has developed these “divine Names” so that we might know when we speak we are properly communicating God.

The fathers and mothers of the church gave us a vocabulary to express that this God is the one who speaks when they articulated what these commandments mean for proper speech about God: God is simple (without parts) and therefore lacking nothing, which is to say God is perfect. God is not a potentiality yet to be realized, but a pure activity, the fullness of goodness. In other words God is perfect. Because God has no potentiality and is perfect; God is immutable and impassible. God cannot be affected by creation, which does not mean God is aloof or does not sorrow or is incapable of love. As Herbert McCabe notes, God’s nearness is more intimate to us than the term ‘suffering’ permits. God is also infinite, eternal and one. What this language provides is, as David Burrell states, more a regulative grammar about how we speak of God than some kind of ontological description of who God is. This grammar reminds us of the second commandment – God is not a creature who can be given the “form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” But this only makes our effort to understand what it means to say “God speaks” all the more difficult and at the same time beautiful. In fact, this language is what makes the incarnation a dramatic, historical event. Otherwise it only explicates what God always already was or strives to become. We already noted that a basic condition for our ability to communicate is that we are creatures. We speak because we are creatures. So how is it possible to say that God who is not a creature “speaks?” Because God assumes that which is not God and speaks without God ceasing to be God or creature ceasing to be creature. All God’s communication is a type or figure of this

central event. Any account of God's speaking that avoids this, violates the commandments.

Here we must remember the first three commandments together: "First, I am the Lord God who acts" – and according to Hebrews does so definitively by speaking in the Son through whom everything was made. Second, do not attribute to me any creaturely form. God speaks through the Incarnation without ceasing to be God. Third, don't misuse my name. The first tells us God acts. The second reminds us that when we speak of God's acting, we must always recognize the difference between God's activity and that of creatures, even when we necessarily use creaturely means to speak of God. And the third tells us that when we use God's name we must not misuse it. God commands that we not misuse God's Name, not that we avoid using it altogether. Some suggest that when the high priest went into the Temple once a year on the Day of Atonement, it was the one day that God's Name was spoken. Now that God has spoken in Jesus, and the temple veil has been torn, we are to use that Name in a new way. The commandments require that we speak of God's actions. We are commanded to use God's name, but must do so in such a way that we do not attribute creaturely form to God. This helps us know what and how we are not to say, so we can say what must be said well.

I think it teaches us to avoid two temptations, temptations especially prominent in contemporary preaching and theology. The first temptation is to treat God as the sublime about which nothing can be said because if God exists, no one could know it given that we (supposedly) know the limits of our knowledge. For those of a philosophical bent, this could be called our kantian inheritance; it is the epistemological policing some philosophers and theologians set up.<sup>2</sup> This is a real temptation to our wordcare because this policing makes sense. It has a certain plausibility. It even obeys the second commandment -- we do not give God any creaturely form. Let me give an example: I recently participated in an inter-faith event where they asked the Unitarian Universalist pastor to offer the opening prayer. Her prayer went, "We pray to you the Unnameable God, not knowing how to address you for we know that all the names we give you are only names we have come up

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<sup>2</sup> One sees it, I believe, in Derrida's proclamation of the impossibility of the divine name when he states that God's Name, "I am," requires a coincidence between 'being' (the 'am') and presence (the 'I' that can be indicated) such that he writes, "I am originally means I am mortal. I am immortal is an impossible proposition. We can even go further: as a linguistic statement 'I am he who am' is the admission of a mortal." If we name God, if we bring together the indexical 'I' and 'being,' then we have not named God. We have given God a creaturely form. Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*, p. 287.

with ourselves. Forgive us and remind us that you are beyond all our language.” At this point I was no longer praying but doing philosophy because I wondered how she could know that – how could she know that God is unnameable, beyond our language? Only if she claims to know more about God than what the revealed names imply could she also know that those names never fit. This reminds me of that very bad ‘Indian’ proverb about the elephant and the blind men, which was actually made famous in the English speaking world by the Nineteenth Century American poet (raised as a Methodist), John Godfrey Saxe, who used it to

claim God was a sublime about whom nothing reasonable could be said.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> **John Godfrey Saxe's ( 1816-1887) version of the famous Indian legend,**

It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.

The *First* approach'd the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side,  
At once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!"

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,  
Cried, -"Ho! what have we here  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me 'tis mighty clear  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear!"

The *Third* approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!"

The *Fourth* reached out his eager hand,  
And felt about the knee.  
"What most this wondrous beast is like  
Is mighty plain," quoth he,  
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!"

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,  
Said: "E'en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most;  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!"

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Then, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant

You know the parable? – six blind men each come upon an elephant and touch it, misconstruing what it is – a wall, a spear, snake, tree, a fan and a rope. The moral of the story, Saxe noted is this: “So oft in theologic wars,  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
*And prate about an Elephant*

*Not one of them has seen!”* If you find yourself either using or agreeing with this parable, it seems to me you may very well have fallen prey to this first temptation, which is neither consistent with reason or faith. It is inconsistent with reason because the parable only works because you already know what an elephant is. It wouldn’t work if I used it to speak about a Zigwobjubilisk. In other words, it is only because you tacitly claim to know more than you admit that this parable and the Unitarian Universalist’s prayer works. It is inconsistent with faith because the first commandment and Hebrews commands that we speak and speak well of God’s activities. “But we do see Jesus.” To fall prey to this epistemological policing is to ignore the basic message Hebrews conveys. It tells us to speak with ‘bold confidence’ that God has spoken in the Son. The Greek word is *parresia*, which is the boldness a free Greek citizen uses to speak in public. Hebrews commands us to have this same boldness about God – act as if you are free citizens of God’s city, living stones in the heavenly temple, and not sniveling creatures policed by your own insecurities.

We are not to speak or present God “in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath,” but it would be cowardice to then refuse to speak and present God at all. It would also deny the first and third commands. The first tells us God does speak and act in history. The third implies that we must use God’s Name, but that we must do so without misusing it.

If we fall prey to this first temptation to treat God only as the sublime about which nothing can be said then every use of the God’s Name by definition can only be a misuse. Then we will be reduced either to silence in order to keep the third commandment not to misuse the Name, or we will neglect it and capitulate to a second temptation where any speaking about God is the same as any other because we know a priori they are all the same – they are all efforts to name the unnameable. There is no difference between saying ‘God is a friend’ or ‘God is my friend Bob.’ All our language about God is really language about ourselves or about our own context. This is the second temptation we face, which is also a temptation because it seems so reasonable. If the first temptation treats God only as the wholly other who is never actually present to us, the second treats God as fully immanent – only found in history. God is reduced to an immanent divine force acting in history to accomplish God’s own being, or “God” is the term we use to make sense

of our own agency. Here everything can be said about God because 'theology is [nothing but] anthropology'. For those of you of a philosophical bent, I would call this the Hegelian–Feuerbachian inheritance. If we are to proclaim God's speaking, as we must, then either of these ways of speaking must be avoided.

4. So what has all this to do with discipleship? After a stirring sermon on who Jesus is, how he is a faithful and merciful high priest, who calls for endurance even in the face of persecution, and summons us to boldness in our speech, Hebrews ends with some admonitions that might seem anticlimactic. In fact, they caused some biblical scholars to wonder if chapter 13 was "authentic." Here are some of what the author admonishes: Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers . . . Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled. . . . Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have . . . . (Hebrews 13: 1–5). But there is a beauty in holiness that Hebrews puts before us, both in the famous litany of the faithful in chapter 11 and here in the encouragement to have our bodies exude that beauty itself. To accomplish that, Hebrews has us to attend to those forms of communication that matter most in everyday life. This is where God communicates to us. Stanley Hauerwas is well known for making evocative statements that he often got from others, and sometimes he cites his sources. One of my favorite comes from a Jewish rabbi: "Any religion that does not tell you what to do with your pots your pans and your genitals isn't worth having." Telling, or using language, sex and economics are all forms of communication. None of us has some right to use whatever language we want about God. Scripture and our forbears in faith must discipline our language about God. Such language matters because it will either communicate or miscommunicate. Just as we do not have some private language or communication would be impossible, so we must not have a private or individual theology. Nor must we consider our sexual or economic communication is somehow private – for they are all forms of communication.

Recently I came across an essay on sex and family, which was considered "radical," so radical that the author lost a job over it. She wrote, "I support the fight for everyone to make choices regarding how they wish to author their own lives [in their sexuality] and the meaning they seek for themselves and those they wish to define as "family."” This of course is also the official position taken by the editors of "The Economist." Now I don't think this position actually communicates because it hides the truth of what everyone at some level agrees upon. I don't think you can actually use language this way. Everyone would say no to some 'choices' and 'definitions' of family, so this does not speak truthfully, all language is meant to communicate truth. It miscommunicates; it does not use the language we share in

common in a reasonable way. If we replace sex and family with economics and theology, notice how a similar form of miscommunication occurs. [Redo above passage with “use of money/trading partners” and then “doctrine/church.”] Those of us who have received the bold witness that God has spoken in the Son already find God communicated with us. God’s communication with us is always material. It is seen before it is heard. It produces a communion that is spiritual and yet always visible. It requires that we hold things in common – ethics, worship, doctrine. I think that one of the unfinished forms of communication we are called to in the Ekklesia Project is to learn better how to hold in common our money. We continue to miscommunicate with it, and I confess I don’t know how to be in communion with my wealth. Our mutual love, our communion, requires that we continue to make the attempt, and see what God might do with it. I also think that our temptation to claim that our language about God is somehow our own, something we are entitled to because of our experience, our tradition, our ecclesial location is a symptom of our fear of having the kind of communion to which God calls. That we share in common doctrines, ways of speaking about God, is both a condition for and a consequence of sharing in common other forms of communication.

“In these last days, God has spoken in the Son.” Hearing that implicates us in a communion. But we have also all miscommunicated – with our language, our worship, our doctrine and our ethics. I don’t want to leave you with some unrealizable ideal of communion. I often wonder why Hebrews continued to write after his first sentence. He tells us God has definitively spoken in the Son such that no more needs to be said, and then goes on to say a great deal more for 12 ½ chapters, admonishing and encouraging us to “go on toward perfection” (Heb. 6:1) and develop a trained character (*hexis*, Heb. 5: 14) that can distinguish good from evil, the beauty of perfection from the hideous of an imperfection that causes us to shrink back from our boldness.

Our task is not somehow to perform God’s communion perfectly without flaw. Only Christ did that. Our task is to recognize we are called to communion and not to be frightened by it even though it will be railed against. We are called to seek those means that “let us go on toward perfection.” That we all miscommunicate reminds us that we all stand in the same situation as those who have not yet seen or heard as we should. We are the immature seeing only in part. Hopefully this keeps us from improper judgments, which are always a source for disunity. Nonetheless that we miscommunicate should provide no solace. Instead, it should remind us we are to “hold fast the confession” and trust in the priest-king who gathers us in order to train our character to distinguish the good from evil, the true from the false, the beautiful from the hideous, so that we might see and hear rightly. Barry Harvey will address this in our next plenary, drawing on the heavenly liturgy in John’s Apocalyptic vision.