

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 4

---

December 1986

## Communication and Culture

Charles Veenstra

*Dordt College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Veenstra, Charles (1986) "Communication and Culture," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 15:  
No. 2, 18 - 24.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol15/iss2/4](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol15/iss2/4)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Communication and Culture

Charles Veenstra  
Professor of Communication



*Charles Veenstra is Professor of Communication at Dordt. A graduate of Dordt College, he received his M.A. from Northern Illinois University and his Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska. Prior to coming to Dordt in 1976, he taught in high school and college.*

## Definitions—Distinctions and Comparisons

"Culture is communication and communication is culture," says Edward T. Hall in *The Silent Language*.<sup>1</sup> This quotation, although confusing, illustrates both the close relationship and the difficulty of separating communication and culture. Yet, to make them synonymous cheapens both terms. In this paper I will attempt first to clarify the relation between culture and communication. Secondly, I will explore several issues and problems the Chris-

tian faces when communicating between cultures. And finally I will trace out several responsibilities of the Christian to guide in handling those issues and/or problems.

The term "culture" has come to refer to several related concepts. It may be helpful to distinguish between the different ways in which the term is used. The first is very broad. The Dutch Theologian Klaas Schilder, for example, used the term in this way. His definition of culture may be paraphrased as the entire process of people attempting to discover and

develop the potencies in creation and to bring all in submission to the norms of God's revealed truth in order that man may better serve God.<sup>2</sup> His encompassing definition clearly indicates that culture is more than a product or artifact. Culture is a way of living in the world. The purpose of culture is God's glorification. Inherent in his view is the cultural mandate given to people at the beginning of history to bring all earthly activity in subjection to the Creator. Culture, then, is always related to religious direction. For example, those who seek to subdue the earth for their own selfish desires are engaged in a culture that is directionally opposed to that of the Christian and so it cannot be assumed that all people of a specific country, region, state, or community are part of the same cultural process. Instead, two broad cultures (the Christian and the non-Christian) are at work largely in religious opposition to each other because of the radical difference in direction of those cultures.

Within this broader definition of culture, we may also speak of "cultures" of given groups of people. These cultures are developed by groups of people who share certain relationships, symbol systems, value systems, and, frequently, geographical space. Culture in this sense is a process of developing products together. Thus a culture is more than any mix of people in a given place; it implies a large degree of sharing.<sup>3</sup> While I would be loath to claim that one such culture is *the* culture, yet, given the fact that culture is directional, we must face the question of relativism in culture: Are all cultures equally good? And to what extent may we evaluate elements of culture? Even though the way of living of one set of people may not be superior to the way of living of another set of people, we will need to discern the religious direction of each culture within the larger picture of culture being for or against God. I will return to this point below.

One can begin to see the place of communication in culture. Communication is essential to cultural activity since communication allows sharing. Although they are similar and interdependent, culture and communication are not identical. Culture is the larger term which

involves all of the activities of people within the created order while, on the other hand, communication is an essential activity deeply embedded in that process of cultural activity. Without communication, it would be impossible to be engaged with other people in cultural activity. Communication enables people to develop relationships and thus live in culture and do culture.

Communication should be defined as the process of engendering meaning in people by means of symbols, signals, and signs.<sup>4</sup> As a process, communication is ongoing, changing, moving, and developing. It influences all participants involved. Symbols include both verbal messages and nonverbal elements, such as graphics, gestures, time, environment, etc. Communication is a broader concept than language. It includes, but is not limited to, linguistic forms and structures. It goes beyond words, even though language is an important element of communication. Types of communication range from mass to interpersonal interactions and use a variety of media from speech to print.

Just as culture cannot be limited to artifacts or products of cultural activity, so also communication cannot be limited to particular messages or artifacts. Although not identical, both are processes. And both result in particular artifacts. But to reduce either term to its products is to miss the essential meaning of each. For example, culture cannot be limited to paintings or theatre productions, nor can communication be limited to books, newspapers, dictionaries, and VCR tapes. With each term, we are referring primarily to process rather than specific products of that process.

### Issues and Problems

Several issues and problems need our consideration as we develop the relation between communication and culture. First, obvious differences in symbol systems exist between groups of people. Little will be said here about linguistic barriers that make sharing and working together in cultural activity very difficult. Often overlooked are the equally significant

differences in nonverbal symbol systems. Sometimes the same symbol will be interpreted differently by different sets of people. Symbols can, if not interpreted similarly, cause misunderstanding and incorrect responses and thus be a barrier to communication, and, consequently, a barrier to cultural activity. Ignorance of the nonverbal symbols is fully as serious as ignorance of verbal symbols in crossing cultural boundaries. I am not referring here

of people. In addition, some aspects of communication, such as use of clothing, will take on greater meaning in one culture than in another. Hair is very important as an identifying symbol for Punk Rock groups. Or, another example, barriers are often unintentionally set up among sets of people because of their different interpretations of time. Latin Americans handle time in business transactions much differently than Americans do. They prefer a

**Comparison of cultures raises questions of whether one culture is superior to another, whether it would be acceptable to try to merge two cultures, whether one may attempt to lay aside one's own culture when interacting with another culture, and whether it is possible to avoid cultural relativism. While we accept diversity, we must also say that there are instances when we need to clarify the direction of an element of a culture. In particular, the Christian's responsibility is not easy to determine in a culture which demonstrates a direction that is not God-directed.**

merely to American ignorance of foreign cultures, but to secular ignorance of Christian symbols in culture.

Second, the value and place of certain forms of communication may vary from culture to culture as well as within a particular culture. For example, listening may be very important in oral cultures while reading and writing are often considered more important in print-oriented cultures. Furthermore, the forms of communication have significant impact on the way particular cultures develop. In other words, an oral culture will rely heavily on personal contact while a print culture will encourage isolated, individual work. Attempts to communicate between these cultures must take account of the differences in forms and how those forms of communication have influenced cultural activity within a particular collection

relaxed time of social interaction with imprecise meeting times before actually dealing with the business at hand.

Third, one always communicates his or her own particular culture when communicating. In contact with other cultures, we cannot escape our own culture. That culture impacts on communication. To pretend that one makes contact "neutrally" without the trappings of culture does not diminish the impact on persons. Even when wishing to do so, an American cannot hide his or her Americanism when crossing cultural boundaries. Individual Americans will be seen in the larger context of American culture whether or not they have participated in the building of that American culture. Interpretation of the other's culture can either assist or hinder communication across cultural lines.

A fourth issue arises out of the contact and interaction of cultures with each other. Comparison of cultures raises questions of whether one culture is superior to another, whether it would be acceptable to try to merge two cultures, whether one may attempt to lay aside one's own culture when interacting with another culture, and whether it is possible to avoid cultural relativism. While we accept diversity, we must also say that there are instances when we need to clarify the direction of an element of a culture. In particular, the Christian's responsibility is not easy to determine in a culture which demonstrates a direction that is not God-directed.

Christians in North America have responded in several ways to the question of developing a Christian culture within the larger culture that has an opposite direction. Some attempt to set up a Christian culture in isolation from the broader culture or society. For example, the Amish separate themselves in an effort to resist influence from the outside. Their cultural activity involves primarily communicating a value system to themselves. Other Christians attempt a quasi-isolationist approach. While they give the appearance of isolation with their own institutions, they often uncritically accept other values from the culture outside of their circles. For example, some Christians on the one hand maintain Christian schools to separate their children from secular, American culture while on the other hand they do business in the same secular way that others do. Some others try to take Christian values and make them fit the larger culture. Inherent in this approach is an attempt to synthesize or harmonize Christian cultural direction with secular direction. An example might be those who say: "if it is not specifically illegal, then go ahead and do it." A Christian car salesman once encouraged a prospective customer to turn back the odometer (before the law was passed forbidding this) so that it reflected the condition of the car rather than the good condition of the car being an indication of how well the owner took care of it.

Yet another group of Christians attempts to reform culture. They work in culture for

renewal. Problems one faces here are how to change culture without getting caught in it, how to be a witness, and how to recognize what can be changed and what must be rejected. Criteria for directing one's cultural activity are not always clear. Even the communication process one uses is integrally involved in this approach to changing culture while at the same time attempting to develop a distinctive culture that is directed toward the glory of God. The essential question is this: how can and should one communicate with a culture with a radically different direction than that of one's own Christian culture? Also, to what extent must one use or change the process of communication with an eye to what is normative while still trying to communicate with the other culture in an effort to reform it? For example, words important in evangelism, such as "sin," "heart," and even "religion," have different meanings to the reforming Christian than to the surrounding secular society. We have a built-in tension: we want to reform communication in culture but how do we communicate to the culture in order to reform it?

### **Responsibilities**

A description of several responsibilities for the Christian in communication and culture will help address the issues and problems discussed above. Standards must reflect the normed nature of cultural activity. That is, we must look to God's revealed Word for direction in all of life—including culture. Normative standards for communication—process and product—must and do hold across cultural lines.

Scripture supplies us with the fundamental principles by which we should judge communication. These principles will be described briefly here. The view of people created in the image of God presumes without question the sovereignty of God. People are created for fellowship with God and are, therefore, directional creatures. Their communication reflects a heart direction toward or against the Creator.

Furthermore, since communication is the fundamental means of fellowship between God

and people,<sup>5</sup> we must hold a high view of the communication process. Scripture not only describes the power of communication, for example, "with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness,"<sup>6</sup> but also warns in the strongest terms against its misuse, for example: "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."<sup>7</sup>

Full respect for all people because they are image bearers is a basic principle for communication. Calvin writes that God "deems himself violated in their person"<sup>8</sup> when people are not given respect. Full respect entails complete honesty in communication,<sup>9</sup> building others up according to their needs,<sup>10</sup> and other communication attitudes and practices which will not be described here.<sup>11</sup>

These fundamental principles based in Scripture become standards for all people. They are inherent in created human nature. Since communication is inherent in culture, these norms for communication in culture hold for all cultures—no matter where they are found. For example, honesty is one of these norms for communication and is one that will hold for all people. Since these norms are an essential part of communication, we should be aware of how they should function to guide communication within and between cultures. They provide direction for reforming culture—both process and artifact. And with these principles as the foundation, we can begin to address our responsibilities more specifically in culture.

A prime responsibility which evidently flows from the above principles is that Christians must be aware of both the nature of culture and the place of communication in that culture. This awareness has several dimensions. One dimension is that we must realize that all people are involved in culture and that a person is inescapably a cultural creature. Therefore, when we engage in communication, we are doing so from within a particular cultural context. We are carrying that culture to others within our own cultural group and to those of other cultural groups. An illustration of this is found in the different meaning even Christians might

have for the Lord's Supper. Because most of us believe the Table of the Lord should be closely supervised, we hesitate to partake of communion in a church of another denomination which practices open communion; our hesitation in turn may confuse others who observe our lack of participation.

A second related dimension is that we need to be aware that the direction of our culture is reflected in our communication. Because culture is directional, it cannot be neutral and, since communication reflects culture, neither can communication be neutral. Either we are exhibiting activity that is directed toward God or we are expressing a culture that is directed away from God.

But communication does not *reflect* only culture; it also participates in *molding* or *forming* culture. The nature of communication itself makes clear that it influences, and thus changes, all who are involved in it. We must recognize this fact of the dynamic process of communication influencing culture as well as culture influencing communication. Culture is not an established, static set of ways of living. Instead, it is a process that is constantly developing as it is influenced by communication. Knowledge of the nature of the communication process is, therefore, a prime responsibility.

Furthermore, we must be aware that what we transmit may be interpreted differently in other cultures from what it is in the culture of the person communicating. For example, when an American tells a Latin American farmer to use fertilizer to increase crop production, the farmer may interpret that advice as evil since tampering with the ground may represent disrespect for the gods which supposedly live in and control the earth.

Another part of this responsibility is to be fully cognizant that we are receiving culture from others when they communicate with us. An obvious example of this is television. A value system, a way of life, and particular behaviors are presented to viewers who may not share fully in that culture. Frequently viewers receive such value systems, without realizing that in some instances those value

systems are in opposition to those of the viewers' culture. Without careful reflection, they may assume that the values are not contradictory. Thus, viewers begin to adopt a televised culture as their own although its values actually contradict their own culture. The end result may indeed be a culture of directionally mixed values—an incoherent or inconsistent culture. Another example may be the introduction of pagan rituals in a Christian worship service by people who are not aware of the cultural roots of a particular ritual. Use of Easter eggs in a worship service would illustrate a lack of awareness that the pagan roots of this

Americans assume their culture is the best. Such an attitude militates mightily against proper communication with other cultures. Although we should not be relativists who assert that all cultures and all cultural activities are equally good or bad, we must be certain yet tactful before we suggest our culture is superior to others. Notice how often remarks are made by people who are certain their area of the country is better than northwest Iowa. Phrases as "nothing but cornfields" reflect provincialism that hinders communication. Or, conversely, the northwest Iowa farmer who complains that Montana has wasteland because

**But communication does not reflect only culture; it also participates in molding or forming culture. The nature of communication itself makes clear that it influences, and thus changes, all who are involved in it. We must recognize this fact of the dynamic process of communication influencing culture as well as culture influencing communication.**

cultural artifact contradict Christian beliefs with respect to the resurrection.

Similarly, methods of communication are culture-laden. What we recognize as an established routine of communication may not be so interpreted by another culture. For example, use of the index finger to signal another person in American culture to "come here" is interpreted much differently by the Vietnamese who use that same gesture to call an animal to "come here." Awareness of other cultures and of how communication functions in other cultural contexts is vital.

A second significant responsibility is that of avoiding the attitude that our particular culture is automatically superior to others'. In some aspects it may indeed be superior, but in other aspects it may not be. Too often North

it cannot grow corn is equally provincial. Besides often being incorrect, this attitude hinders cultural exchange and cultural development. Yet, as members of a Christian culture, we must also work to be sure that our culture is in accord with God's norms and then, without an attitude of superiority, try to persuade others of our stance.

A third major responsibility is to understand other cultures. This responsibility has two major dimensions. First, for any communication to be assured any measure of success, the sender must carefully and fully analyze his or her audience. Without knowing the beliefs and practices of the audience, the speaker has no basis on which to plan the most effective methods of communication. This is an essential element in communication. In a broader

cultural context, anyone who wishes to communicate with a particular culture must know how people in that culture will receive the sender's messages. One then would not only know how to plan messages but would also know what kind of response to expect from the audience. Accurate communication occurs only when the message engendered matches the message sent. Audience analysis is at the core of the communication process.

But more important than success in communication is the necessary element of respect which audience analysis demonstrates. All people are image-bearers of God—in whatever culture they live. Respect means that we avoid simply tolerating other cultures as inferior. On the other hand, neither may we uncritically accept their culture, or part of their culture, as legitimate. Instead, respect means that we seek to understand that culture, that audience, as fully as possible. Our communication affects the direction of life of every person involved in that communication. Clearly, our duty is to help all people live correctly as image-bearers. Only by determining their needs, beliefs, and practices, can we work together in cultural activity that is properly directed.

Following understanding of culture comes the necessary evaluation of the culture we send and/or receive. We need to answer the question of what are the Christian standards which we should use to evaluate. Indicated above are the broad outlines of a position that culture must properly reflect direction toward God. When we first have carefully understood that other culture with full respect for its people, we may be in a position to confront certain practices which are wrong—in our culture and other cultures. For example, we may deplore apartheid in South Africa, but we must be sure that our communication demonstrates an attitude of understanding and care for the needs of all people in that culture. Christian standards for evaluation must be evident. Communication experts must be aware, analyze, and evaluate communication within a clear understanding of the entire culture. Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists must do the same. What is needed are not limited specialists or generalists

but both in one person—a person who can communicate well within one's own culture and between cultures in order to reform culture—both process and artifact. By developing the constituent elements of the broad outlines I have described, we should be able to show that people may better serve God by obeying the norms of God's revealed truth for communication and culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1959), p. 191.

<sup>2</sup>Schilder's complete definition is: "the systematic endeavor toward the aggregate of exploitive labor to be successively produced by the sum-total of human beings who have assumed the task of disclosing the potencies lying dormant in creation, as in the course of history these potencies come within reach, of developing them in compliance with the laws of their individual natures, of placing them at the disposal of all, both near and far, in submission to the norms of God's revealed truth, in order to make the treasures thus acquired serviceable to man as liturgical creature and, subsequently, to place them, together with the now more thoroughly furnished man, at the feet of God, to whom be all praise forevermore." Quoted in Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), p. 139.

<sup>3</sup>Sometimes the term "subculture" is used to distinguish sets of people from other sets within a larger group. I shall use the term "cultures" to refer to sets of people without further delineating subsets as subcultures.

<sup>4</sup>For fuller explanation of these characteristics, see Daryl Vander Kooi and Charles Veenstra: *Responsible Public Address* (Dordt College, 1983), pp. 4-8.

<sup>5</sup>Werner Elert describes the place of communication: "This act of expression is a form of response to God who called man into existence by his word. When God created man, he immediately instituted a form of communication which implies man's response to God's call." See *The Christian Ethos*, trans. Carl J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>James 3:9 (All Scripture references are from the New International Version.)

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 12:36.

<sup>8</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), I, p. 296.

<sup>9</sup>See especially "The Westminster Larger Catechism" for a comprehensive statement on the requirements of the ninth commandment, in *The Confession of Faith* (Publications Committee of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1970), pp. 230-236.

<sup>10</sup>Ephesians 4:29.

<sup>11</sup>These requirements are treated extensively in Vander Kooi and Veenstra: *Responsible Public Address*.