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ABSTRACT
        For a professor who is also an evangelical Christian,
it is one of life's ironies that despite her graduate school plans to
teach at a large research university, she teaches instead at a small
evangelical Christian college. Her concern as an academic is to
discover how a person who professes evangelical Christianity can
transcend the confines of ethnocentric (religious) communication and
communicate in a cosmopolitan manner without denying the central
place faith occupies in his or her life--in other words, how to
elaborate a Christian theory of communication. Many fundamentalist
writers who practice ethnocentric communication characterize secular
universities as "bastions of moral relativism that leave no room for
the Christian worldview" and as "dominated by 'politically correct'
(P.C.) thought that can be contradicted only at great personal
sacrifice" (Dobson 1993). A recent trend in communication theory has
been to link competent communication to particular attitudes and
values, as well as defining the way competent communication is
enacted. Barnett Pearce's notion of cosmopolitan communication is one
such approach. Pearce argues that the adoption of a cosmopolitan
style, which stresses coordination among various viewpoints rather
than bringing viewpoints into line with one another, will result in
better communication processes. This paper discusses the implications
of adopting such a communication style for a person who professes
evangelical Christianity and who desires to being others into a
relationship with Christ. Rather than seeing cosmopolitan
communication as excluding the possibility of evangelism, it is
argued that evangelism might include the characteristics of
cosmopolitan communication. (Contains 3 figures and 10 references).
(Author/PA)

Cosmopolitan Communication and the Evangelical Impulse: Transcending a Paradox

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ABSTRACT

A recent trend in communication theory has been to link competent communication to particular attitudes and values, as well as defining the way competent communication is enacted. Barnett Pearce's notion of cosmopolitan communication is one such approach. Pearce argues that the adoption of a cosmopolitan style, which stresses coordination among variou᷉ viewpoints rather than bringing viewpoints into line with one another, will result in better communication processes. This paper discusses the implications of adopting such a communication style for a person who professes evangelical Christianity and who desires to bring others into a relationship with Christ. Rather than seeing cosmopolitan communication as excluding the possibility of evangelism, it is argued that evangelism might include the characteristics of cosmopolitan communication.

. . .the cosmopolitan communicator can find coherence in a world in which many incommensurate stories are told and incompatible practices are performed. This tolerance for difference liberates cosmopolitan communicators to care about and take steps to find out about worldviews other than their own.

(Barnett Pearce, *Communication and the Human Condition*, p. 193)

The danger of tolerance is that ultimately the movement will lose its identity and will begin to drift toward the position of the people with whom it carries on a dialogue.

(Jerry Falwell, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, p. 176)

As a graduate student, I took a course in rhetorical criticism from Walter Fisher. The year was 1981, shortly after Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority had claimed victory for the election of Ronald Reagan and his conservative agenda. I was intrigued by Falwell. He had appeared to come out of nowhere, his style was bombastic, and he had the ACLU frightened enough to take out a full-page newspaper ad with the headline, "If the Moral Majority has its way, you'd better start praying." I was a Christian, but had a hard time understanding how Falwell made the connection between his faith and his agenda. Distinctions among denominations were unimportant to me at the time; I simply attended a neighborhood church and paid little attention to doctrine. I undertook a study of his book, *Listen America!*, in an effort to understand his fundamentalist views.

In one of life's ironies, I wound up at a small, evangelical Christian college despite my plans to find a position at a large, research university. Over the years, I have come to embrace tenets of evangelical Christianity, although not, sometimes, without difficulty. The relationship of evangelical Christianity to its sibling fundamentalism has become more clear, particularly in their common belief that all people must be drawn into the Kingdom of God. And over the years I have come to understand only too well how people like Falwell make a connection between Christianity and conservative political agendas. Falwell may not be a visible political force anymore, but there are many people who believe as he does in the need to politicize faith. Many of my colleagues profess attitudes similar to Falwell. Some are hostile to women. As

recently as the Fall, 1993 semester, our Faculty Development Council secured a speaker for a workshop who presented his views on "Correct Christian Thinking" and "A Biblical Worldview," views that mandated particular life and teaching styles.

My professional life has been one of creating balance among seemingly incommensurate worlds. It is difficult, for instance, to be a feminist when many of those around me feel women have no right to preach or to hold leadership roles in churches. It is even more difficult to be in a world where people like Mel and Norma Gabler are lionized for their efforts to "Christianize" public school textbooks (Steffen, 1994), and yet exist as a person who seeks discussion and interchange with a variety of viewpoints. How does one live a life in the world of ideas when there is one Truth and one Way, and all other ways are considered falsehoods?

The difficulty of creating balance reached a critical point when I read Barnett Pearce's book, *Communication and the Human Condition*. His description of ethnocentric communication appeared to fit evangelical thinking quite well: there is an emphasis not only on what "is" but on what "ought to be"; there is a distinction made between those who are saved (us) versus those who are not (them); "they" will spend eternity in hell while "we" will spend it in heaven; and most importantly, "whatever answers are given to the epistemic question are explicitly assumed to support the ways of life governed by questions of 'Who am I?,' 'Who are we?,' and 'What is the nature of the world in which we live?"' (p. 125). And despite his acknowledgment that ethnocentric communication constitutes an important response to particular patterns of lived experiences, ethnocentric communication is dangerous because we may ignore important differences between people, and because we may fail to see that others "want or believe things we cannot imagine" (p. 132).

At first glance, it seems a paradox to consider oneself both an evangelical Christian and a cosmopolitan communicator. There can be no denial that Christianity is by definition ethnocentric. One is either saved or not saved; one has decided to either reject or accept Christ. That does not mean, however, that the gospel must necessarily be communicated in an ethnocentric manner--ethnocentric theology does not necessarily imply ethnocentric communication. This paper represents an effort to find balance, an effort to discover how a person who professes evangelical Christianity can transcend the

confines of ethnocentric communication and communicate in a cosmopolitan manner without denying the central place faith occupies in his or her life.   It is a step toward a Christian theory of communication. Toward this end, I first review Pearce's theory of communication. Next, I move to a consideration of evangelical communication as ethnocentric. Finally, I offer an alternative way of viewing both cosmopolitan communication and evangelical efforts.

Those to whom doctrinal and denominational distinctions are important will want to know how the terms "fundamentalist" and "evangelical" are being used. Fundamentalism, for example, has no clear-cut definition. It "should be understood primarily as an attempt to protect the essential elements (fundamentals) of the Christian faith from the eroding effects of rationalism and naturalism" (Meagher, O'Brien, & Aherne, 1979, p. 1429). However, members of the fundamentalist movement have redefined themselves in recent years as "neo-evangelicals." And "evangelical [is] a term whose meaning must be defined by the context. . . .In the U.S. the term may refer to those who stress evangelism and personal experience, biblical authority, human sinfulness, the atonement of Christ, and the necessity of new birth" (p. 1268). Evangelism is the act of "proclaiming the gospel . . . .and winning converts to the Christian faith" (p. 1271).

In using the term "evangelical impulse," therefore, I am referring to the efforts of those people who proclaim the gospel in a public manner, and who may interpret this proclamation process as one that includes movement toward social justice, the realignment of social values, and legislative change. Thus, while a purist might claim that Jerry Falwell is an fundamentalist and Charles Colson is an evangelical, both are working in the public arena to make the gospel known and to effect changes in society that will reflect the importance of the Christian religion within it. This type of activist evangelism is also reflected in arguments such as Weigel's (1993) editorial that commended President Clinton for his expression of faith and his recognition of its importance in our lives, but exhorted him to "walk the talk" and make Cabinet appointments and introduce legislation consistent with his faith.

Cosmopolitan Communication as an Ideal

Pearce had several concerns that resulted in the articulation of a type of communication he labeled as "cosmopolitan." His professional life "has been shaped by [his] unwillingness or inability to

ignore instances of 'poor' communication" (p. xiii). He laments our present situation that creates communication which "impedes international understanding, cooperation, and the evolution of civility" (p. xv). His goal was the creation of communication theory that could "deal with what it means to live a life, the shape of social institutions and cultural traditions, the pragmatics of social change, and the poetics of social order" (p. xvi). In that regard, Pearce's theory is not meant to be value-free; he has a vision of what life ought to be like should the assumptions of his theory be embraced. In pursuit of his theory, he outlined assumptions, three communication processes, and four forms of communication. And in the course of his book, he concludes that cosmopolitan communication has the best chance of enhancing our humanity and moving us toward more civilized discourse.

In order to understand how Pearce comes to this conclusion, and to understand why it create. concern for an evangelical such as myself, his theory must be briefly retraced. Pearce starts with the fundamental premise that communication isn't a tool that we manipulate, but rather that we live *in* communication. We construct reality through our communication of it. And because we communicate differently in different groups, we experience being human differently.

Consequently, Pearce argues, there is no action without meaning, and no meaning without action. Human activity is a recurring, reflexive process in which resources are expressed in practices and in which practices (re)construct resources. *Resources* are all the concepts, stories, etc. by which people make their world coherent. *Practices* are any situated, collaborative accomplishment of a social event or object. People use resources in order to act, but in acting, they construct and reconstruct resources. In the Christian faith, for example, resources are the core beliefs that guide thinking about the world: Jesus is the Son of God, his death on the cross created atonement for the sins of any person who believes in him, and those who believe in him will live eternally. Practices are forms of worship, prayer, bible study and homiletics, etc. As Christians engage in practices they reconstruct their resources and construct new ones; as resources are constructed and reconstructed they may be manifested in new practices.

Human action is geared toward coherence, coordination, and mystery. *Coherence* is the process by which people tell themselves and others stories in order to interpret the world around them and their place within it. The stories that are told are not assumed to be an "accurate" description of the world.

Facts may underlie stories, but do not determine them--stories are always more than the facts that are known. Thus we know the "facts" of Jesus' life through biblical accounts, but we believe also, as evangelicals, that we are called into a relationship with Christ, and we are also called to help others embrace that relationship.

Coordination is constituted by the practices people use in order to act in concert with others to bring about good outcomes and prevent bad ones. Coordination occurs where two or more people construct together the events and objects of the social world. We gain coordination in our faith through practices such as baptism and communion, worship services, biblical studies, and the sharing of our faith. And *mystery* is the recognition that the human condition is more than any of the particular stories that make it coherent or any of the patterns of coordination that construct the events and objects of the real world. It is the recognition that there are other stories.

Pearce further argues that there are forms of communication and ways of being human. He notes:

Forms of communication differ depending on how the communicators treat each other, and the nature of the "reading" they give to the stories that comprise their "resources." To get at these characteristics is to focus on the extent to which the participants treat each other "like a native" and whether they put their resources "at risk."

To treat someone like a native means to hold him or her accountable to your own evaluative and interpretive criteria; treating them not like a native involves discovering and using their own interpretive and evaluative criteria, even if those differ substantially from your own. Protecting your resources from risk refers to the suspension of disbelief that comes from deep enmeshment in your own stories. To put your resources at risk means reading your stories with a willing suspension of belief, comparing them with the emerging pattern of communication, intending to change them if it seems appropriate. (p. 92)

Forms of communication are created in the combination of resource risk and the treatment of the other, as shown in Figure I. *Monocultural communication* occurs where others are treated like natives and resources are not put at risk. This kind of communication is characterized by the belief that there is only

one way of thinking (one's own). Monocultural communication occurs in highly developed relationships or isolated societies.

Ethnocentric communication occurs when resources are not put at risk, but where other people are treated as nonnatives when they do not share resources with the communicator. Frequently, the fact that others do not share resources with the communicator is seen as justification by the communicator for treating them as though they were inferior.

Modernistic communication occurs in a milieu where others are treated as nonnatives and resources are systematically put at risk. The primary moral injunction for the modernistic communicator is to find bigger, better, and faster ways of doing things; an example of modernistic communication is the scientific method. However, Pearce argues, modernistic communication is also unstable, and because of its instability people try to find responses to it in forms such as Neotraditional communication and relativism.

All three forms of communication hold coherence to be the most important process. People using those forms of communication will attempt to coordinate as much as their stories and resources will allow, but if coherence is sufficiently threatened, coordination will be disregarded so that stories can be protected. In contrast to the other three forms of communication, cosmopolitan communication "strains" the taxonomy by occupying a space in which coordination is preferred over coherence. Visually, cosmopolitan communication might be located at the apex of a pyramid that had been placed over the original taxonomy, as seen in Figure 2. Some resources are put at risk, but not all; there is an awareness of one's resources that doesn't occur in the other three types of communication.

> Cosmopolitan communication results from a commitment to find ways of achieving
> coordination without (l) denying the existence or humanity of "other" ways of achieving
> coherence and mystery, as monocultural communication does; (2) deprecating or
> opposing "other" ways of achieving coherence and mystery, as ethnocentric
> communication does; or (3) being committed to a perpetual process of changing one's
> own way of achieving coherence and mystery, as modernistic communication does. (p.
> 169)

In fairness to Pearce's classifications of communication, it should be noted that he deals with evangelical religion in his chapter on responses to modernity. Evangelical religion is seen as "religious Neotraditionalism," which treats modernistic communication as a threat to valued beliefs. People like Falwell and his "Moral Majority" have created a story that provides them with a sense of coherence: the founders of our society intended it to be guided by biblical principles, God has blessed the United States with prosperity but will withdraw it unless we return to biblical principles, and "secular humanists" have substituted their own beliefs in the place of "true faith." Pearce notes:

> This story provides conservative Christians a means for achieving coherence, coordination,
> and mystery in a society that has enfranchised "secular humanism." The rival story, they
> change, has become so taken for granted that government officials and liberal opinion leaders
> no longer see it as partisan--that is, as one of a set of rival stories. . . ."Moral sanity" is offered
> as an alternative to secular humanism. In this perspective, morality is a way of thinking about
> issues rather than the stand one takes on those issues. . . .When acting morally, persons do
> not experience doubt or confusion, or worry much about the consequences of their actions.
> Because what they are doing is in obedience to God, they trust God to make sure that what
> God wants will be done. (pp. 158-159)

Neotraditional communication resembles ethnocentric communication because of its internal consistency, easy coordination practices, and the place of mystery within it (p. 162). The difficulty with Neotraditional communication is that it occurs in a modernistic society where others do not share the same practices and resources as the Neotraditionalists. The outcome of communication between Neotraditionals and "happy modernists" is often reciprocated diatribe: "The most characteristic acts of each challenge the basic assumptions of the other, and each side's attempts to explain its own position seem foolish when interpreted in the social reality of the other" (p. 162).

Evangelism as Ethnocentric Communication

My argument is less charitable than Pearce's: I would argue that evangelical Christianity, particularly in its appearance in public discourse, is ethnocentric. When dialogue fails, and when others fail to be "converted" to the conservative Christian view, there is a retreat into dogma as a place of safety.

This safe place reassures the evangelical that he or she is right even if the rest of the world thinks differently, and that the reward for being correct is to be found in the afterlife if not in the present one. Those who do not accept the story are seen as outsiders--at best deluded, and at worst, destined for damnation. Even worse, though, are those who would teach things contrary to the Christian story. They are seen as instruments of evil, and must be ignored or, better yet, silenced.

This ethnocentric position is articulated by various evangelicals and fundamentalists. A sampling of their pronouncements reveals similar positions. Colson (1992), for example, argues the importance of proclaiming the gospel in a public way and for working toward a change in the secular culture:

> Yet the huge gulf between the Christian and the secular view of man [sic] is sometimes underestimated because there are so many people with a Christian veneer. Many of our neighbors and co-workers don't seem so different from us--on the surface. But their world-view is utterly in conflict with Christian values, and their relativism is dominating a culture that was, until recently, at least nominally Christian. The scandal is that we in the church have allowed this to happen. We have failed to stand for truth, failed to articulate, defend, and advance an intelligent and coherent Christian world-view. (p. 192)

Dobson (1993), on the other hand, emphasizes the need to listen to "appropriate" teachings and to protect oneself, and in particular one's children, from the influences of secular thought:

> My great concern for students in the young adult years is that they are extremely vulnerable to the leadership of their professors. One of the primary reasons education changes people is that students admire and identify with those who tower over them inn experience, training, maturity, intelligence, and charisma. This makes a young man or woman an easy mark for older adults who want to reorder their basic beliefs and value systems. Anyone who holds the power to flunk a student finds it easy to prevail in debates about faith, morals, or philosophy! That's why we must continue to support godly men and women who have dedicated their lives to Christian principles and to continuing those ideas in our offspring. Professors' worldviews influence whatever they teach, from

the humanities to the basic sciences, and what they think about God cannot be hidden

from their students. (p. 4)

And Martin (1993) would condemn most vigorously those who profess to be Christians but who

have not taken the time to articulate the meaning of a Christian perspective in their teaching of

academic subjects: "The most dangerous position is secular thinking disguised as biblical

teaching."

Such pronouncements undoubtedly flow out of a sincere desire to live according to Jesus'

commandment in Matthew 28:19 -20: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have

commanded you" (NIV). Coherence is stressed over coordination; indeed, coherence is presumed to

affect the outcome of all situations. Martin (1993) stresses that we end up where we start--our worldview

affects the choices we make and the journey we take. There is a rejection of equifinality--different starting

points will absolutely end up in different places, and the same starting point will always lead to the same

outcome.

It is not the belief in God as biblically revealed that creates ethnocentrism in the evangelical

community, nor is it necessarily the desire to convert others to a Christian worldview that creates

ethnocentric thinking. *Rather, it is the way in which alternatives are vilified and rejected as inadequate that*

creates ethnocentric communication. Martin (1993), for instance, claims that the difference between

Christianity and other religions is based in subjective versus objective views: all other religions are

subjective because they begin and end with humans, while Christianity is objective because it begins and

ends with God. He further claims that Christianity cannot ultimately be understood as a religion, because it

shares nothing in common with other religions of the world. We are engaged in a holy war to establish

Truth.

Further vilification is found in Dobson's (1993) characterizing of secular universities as "bastions of

moral relativism that leave no room for the Christian worldview" and as "dominated by 'politically correct'

(P.C.) thought that can be contradicted only at great personal sacrifice" (p. 2). And Colson characterizes

the idea that there can be no absolutes as "frightening," the result of which is "unbridled tolerance" (p. 171).

To live as a true Christian, he argues, requires confrontation with relativism, offending (if we must) others with the gospel, in order to challenge the values of the culture and "contend for Christian truth in the marketplace" (p. 190). The most powerful enemies of the Christian worldview are secularism and Islam:

This [secularist] world-view is stealthy, subtle, and sometimes well camouflaged. Supported by intellectuals in every walk of life, this relativistic world-view can afford to be subtle because, by its very nature, it appeals to the weakest and most vulnerable aspects of human nature. People are naturally drawn to it. They throw their arms around it and surrender, as the majority of Americans have.

The other enemy, Islam, actually a perversion of Christianity, is far more aggressive. Islam is a theocratic religion which teaches that all areas of life are within its reign. Being submitted to Allah means being fully integrated into a society with rules, values, and standards. (p. 198-199).

Is all evangelical communication ethnocentric? No. But there is always a danger of moving into an us-versus-them mentality, a position of moral superiority from which others are judged as lacking. How, then, can a person who believes in evangelical Christianity communicate in a cosmopolitan manner, reaping the benefits of coherence among incommensurate stories and practices?

Evangelism as "Cosmopolitan" Communication

As previously explained, cosmopolitan communication stresses coordination over coherence. That is, it is an attempt to create understanding, without denying that there are other ways of achieving coherence and mystery, without deprecating those other ways of achieving coherence and mystery, and without constantly changing the way in which one creates coherence and mystery. Evangelical communication, on the other hand, rests on the assumption that Jesus Christ is the only way in which one approaches God, and stresses the importance of bringing others into this understanding. How does one evangelize, then, without denial of other viewpoints, deprecation of those viewpoints, or drift toward those viewpoints? It is a paradox--a situation of mutually exclusive demands.

Paradoxes are uncomfortable. They create a feeling of "either-or" for us, but are coupled with the knowledge that either choice made will have negative consequences. If we choose to act in ways

consistent with an evangelical world view (as articulated earlier) we run the risk of being close-minded, judgmental, and ultimately, laughable. If we choose to communicate in a cosmopolitan way, there is a danger than we might ultimately compromise our beliefs because of the strain of maintaining them among incommensurate ideas.

Paradoxes can also be useful. Falletta (1983) claims that a paradox is "truth standing in its head to attract attention" (p. xvii). A paradox calls attention to the contradictory demands of our lives. Pearce (1994) suggests two means of overcoming paradoxes: (1) decide which of the two demands is more important and act on it; or (2) reconstruct the context that creates the paradox.

The first of these means of dealing with the paradox is suggested by Scripture. In Matthew 22:36, Jesus reminds us that the first and greatest commandment is to love God; the second is to love one's neighbor as oneself--"all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (v.40, NIV). These commands are reiterated in John 13:34: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." If we give precedence to this command over that to convert others to Christianity, then we will remain in relationship with others even if efforts at conversion "fail."

The second means of reconciling the paradox is to reconstruct the context. A way of reconstructing the context might be that, rather than seeing evangelical communication and cosmopolitan communication as mutually exclusive, we see them both as straining the taxonomy. Pearce notes:

> Cosmopolitan communication resembles monocultural communication in many ways.
> Like monocultural communicators, cosmopolitans treat others like natives and do not put
> their resources at risk. They differ from monocultural communicators both in the content
> of the resources that define what it means to be a "native," by the emphasis on achieving
> coordination through social eloquence rather than by consensus in the stories told to
> achieve coherence and mystery, and by the degree of mindfulness about communication
> per se. (p. 185)

In evangelical communication, we can treat others as natives by remembering that all are loved by God, all are called into relationship with Him, and all are allowed to make that choice freely. Rather than making the acceptance of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ the mark of a "native," the classification is

made instead on the basis of one's membership in humanity--all are called into relationship with God. Whether the call is answered is the responsibility of the one who hears, not the responsibility of the one who communicates the gospel. Further, by placing emphasis on coordination, the evangelical Christian comes to understand why people believe as they do, and to value those explanations as "real" and meaningful to those who offer them. We act first to love and understand others (coordination), and second to preach the gospel (coherence). Finally, by continual mindfulness about one's communication, the evangelical Christian recognizes that even his or her story about the gospel is still *only one* means of apprehending it. While Christians share a vocabulary of faith, they do not experience isomorphic experiences in their relationship with God. Judging the quality of another's faith experience shuts down communication.

Although evangelical communication and cosmopolitan communication may share these characteristics, they will also differ in one respect. Evangelical communication can be seen as the other side of cosmopolitan communication; in the three-dimensional model shown in Figure 3, evangelical communication is the apex of an opposing pyramid situated over the original taxonomy creating monocultural, ethnocentric, and modernistic communication. The axis that distinguishes evangelical communication from cosmopolitan communication is one that distinguishes between seeking understanding and the extension of an invitation.

Cosmopolitan communication has as its primary goal the understanding of different worldviews. Evangelical communication also shares this goal, but has too the goal of inviting others into relationship with God. Love of the other translates into a desire to share what one has experienced in God. Evangelical communication avoids falling into ethnocentric positions when the communicator recognizes that love must be primary, and that the continuation of relationships is more important than agreement on beliefs.
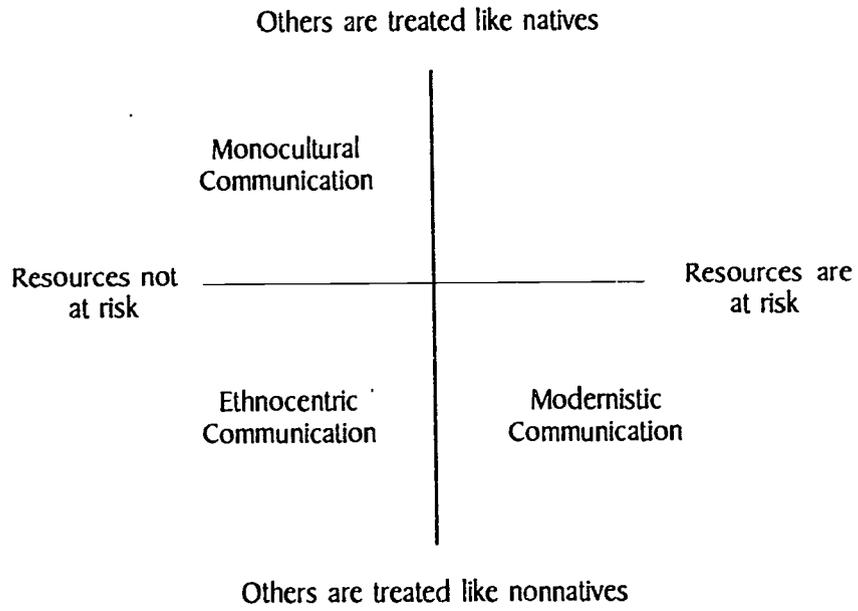
In an age of instant coffee, relationships, and solutions, it is difficult to remember that people come to Christ in their own time, and in their own ways. By taking a long view of the road toward salvation, the evangelical communicator avoids ethnocentrism by making love and understanding primary.
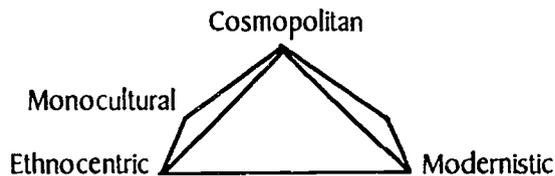
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Figure 1

Forms of Communication

Others are treated like natives

Monocultural Communication	

Resources not at risk ———————————————— Resources are at risk

Ethnocentric Communication	Modernistic Communication

Others are treated like nonnatives

Figure 2

The relationship of cosmopolitan communication to
other forms of communication

Cosmopolitan

Monocultural

Ethnocentric   Modernistic

Figure 3
The relationship of cosmopolitan communication to
evangelical communication

Cosmopolitan

Monocultural

Seeks understanding

Ethnocentric   Modernistic

Extends invitation

Evangelical

Cosmopolitan Communication and the Evangelical Impulse