

Review

Schultz, Quentin J., 2020. *Communicating with Grace and Virtue: Learning to Listen, Speak, Text, and Interact as a Christian*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. ISBN 9781540961273

By Bill Strom, PhD

Scholar professor Quentin (Quin) Schultze provides readers with a brief and elegant call to what it means to be a servant communicator in the 21st Century. Schultze begins by sharing his struggles growing up amidst failed communication and broken communicators as his parents battled alcoholism and schizophrenia. However, with grace and virtue he builds the hopeful case that all of us, no matter our brokenness, bear God's image, possess His communicative gifts, and may choose virtuous habits that show God's gracious Spirit at work. Targeted for university and seminary students and professors, as well as pastors looking to improve their relational and media talents, Schultze provides a drone-high view of communication studies, offers biblical and theological insights for principled communication, and shares personal and cultural examples to connect with his readers. The book is a tidy, quick read packed with insights and incentives to shape hearts and habits of redemptive communication across diverse contexts. This work would complement textbooks in communication and theology, make a thoughtful read for group study in most churches, and help anyone improve their communication with family, friends, and followers.

Schultze's manner of constructing the book signals his awareness that readers live in a distracted digital age; he keeps paragraphs short, call-out boxes plentiful, and layout simple. This design allows more breadth than depth, welcomes additional voices from colleague-contributors (in boxed call-outs), and adds pithy examples on everything from dating and texting to testimony and prayer (in side-bars). Yet this style does not undermine his ability to show mastery of communication studies as he explains its divisions (such as interpersonal, organizational, small group, mediated), covers common topics (e.g., listening, conflict, nonverbal cues, storytelling), adds helpful definitions of technical jargon for newcomers (e.g., metacommunication, rhetoric, intrapersonal), and provides thought-provoking questions for lively discussion. Indeed, Chapter 1 is an excellent primer of how academics study communication, and includes lists of careers in which students might one day serve faithfully, such as journalism, public relations, marketing, health communication, and social media.

The book's main topics are organized loosely along a progression from our inner life to our observed communication. For Schultze, one's inner life entails

accepting the call to be a servant communicator (Chapter 1), living with an attitude of gratitude (Chapter 2), being responsible to God—mainly as obedient listeners (Chapter 3), and cultivating virtue (Chapter 6). The logic is that these ideals are means by which we redeem our psychological, relational, and sinful brokenness (Chapter 4). As we “address brokenness,” we find and follow ways of servant communication as expressed through enhanced community toward *shalom* (Chapter 5), meaningful story-telling similar to Jesus (Chapter 7) and discernment of media content and technology (Chapter 8). While the author does not tie these diverse topics to a systematic theology of “servant communication,” he fulfills his goal that the book provide “a journey into biblical metacommunication” – talk about talk from a faithful perspective. (p. 40) Schultze draws his interpretive and critical lenses from ample scripture, Judeo-Christian theologians (especially Augustine), and personal experience. His creativity shines brightly as he introduces phrases that capture new light, such as peaceful communication, truth-loving communities, communicating courageously, listening obediently, and medium fit.

With frequent reference to his dysfunctional family—in short stories to begin several chapters—the author may lead some to think the book might dig deeply into his own personal brokenness, thwarted communication, and story of healing. While this theme occurs from time to time, it does not sustain nor define the work. The author notes that he “wanted to write this book to help Christians discover the joy of communicating well in spite of fear, loneliness, and brokenness” (p. 15). The key phrase is “in spite of” rather than “by learning from” or “while living with” brokenness. Though the author mentions gaining empathy for peoples’ brokenness, he relies more on sound principles of positive self-talk and communication to help readers thrive. Those principles call the reader to accept personal imperfections, show vulnerability, and share stories for mutual healing. Along the way, he encourages readers to admit biases, not blame others, and release the need to control. He ends by prompting readers to confess regularly (to God), and act justly when they would rather sit on their hands.

Given the title *Communicating with Grace and Virtue*, one might expect full treatments of grace and virtue. While the notion of grace receives mention here and there, and stories shared convey a gracious spirit, Schultze spends most of his effort on extolling the virtues of virtue as the wellspring of redemptive communication. The analysis in Chapter 6 draws initially from the ancient Greek call for character and integrity, and then deepens with the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5. In scripture-rich description, Schultze elucidates how joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control renew communication. (A promise that he will address love and faithfulness elsewhere in the book seems un-kept.) As the author links these virtuous fruits to public relations, copywriting, teaching, dating, texting, talk-show banter, message timing, joking, and language use, the reader picks up the

thesis: a regenerated heart makes communication new. In this way, Schultze delivers on the promise implied in the book's subtitle: "Learning to listen, speak, text, and interact as a Christian."

For all its faithful theological and practical insights, the book also carries some limiting features. One is that it is a primer for improved communication across diverse contexts and less so a how-to for any particular one. For example, the topics of evangelism, conflict management, public speaking and forgiveness receive slim attention, although readers will understand the need to handle each with care and virtue. The author offers golden tips on dressing for interviews, finding a listening partner, writing personal mission statements, and loving customers, topics that represent the eclectic and ubiquitous nature of communication and its academic study. In telling stories and anecdotes, Schultze's method is more show than tell, more quality of communication than content *per se*. This approach aligns with his purpose to start with the heart (in virtue) and letting this shape interaction through God's grace.

A second observation is that while Schultze's analysis employs biblical, theological, rhetorical, and practical wisdom to advance his claims, references to social science discoveries on human communication are notably missing. To be sure, his handling of ancient and traditional texts construct lively arguments for how we see the Spirit at work, yet the book misses the opportunity to draw on facts based on large samples of broken-yet-redeemed people. For example, interpersonal communication scholars routinely rely on research from positive psychology to support how personal virtues - not vice - deliver redeeming communication and the abundant life. This critique belies the reviewer's bias as a social scientist, so needs to be understood as such, and may not be shared by professors and ministry leaders who use the book. However, to tap Augustine's insight that all truth belongs to God, it may be that scientific scholarship has much to offer rhetorical and theological proofs in order to form a more compelling argument for virtuous communication.

A final concern is that despite the author's call for "embracing diversities" (p. 90), "questioning stereotypes" (p. 91), and avoiding in-tribe "confirmation bias" (p. 75), the book remains traditional in its sources. To be sure, the author draws on classic works by established scholars, including Augustine of Hippo, Abraham Heschel, Henri Nouwen, James Carey, Marshall McLuhan, Søren Kierkegaard, Robert Greenleaf, Phil Yancey and Frederick Buechner, to name a few, and it is pleasing to see references to Sissela Bok, Marilyn McEntyre, and Mary Oliver. There remains room, however, for other voices with important messages about communication, such as Stuart Hall's cultural studies and Chris Kramarae's muted

group perspective. These are equally respected authors and approaches that take us out of traditional faith perspectives to understand worldviews of our neighbor.

In the main, Quentin Schultze convinces readers that communication is everywhere and diverse, a gift of God to humankind, yet in ongoing repair and redemption. *Communicating with Grace and Virtue* provides theory and theology toward habits of the heart for renewed communication relationally and digitally. His entry-level handling of big ideas and important themes provide a ready handbook for students, instructors, and pastors seeking to improve their personal communication. Given the wide number of pre-print endorsements, it seems leaders across North America see its place in drawing people to God and each other via the wisdom Schultze shares.

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