

Derr, Colleen R. *Renewing Communication: Spirit-Shaped Approaches for Children, Youth, and Families*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020. 288 pp. Paperback. USD 29.00.

From the beginning, the author, Colleen Derr, makes it clear that her book is about transformational communication, which can only be done through the power of the Holy Spirit. She puts great emphasis on this belief because, as she affirms, without the Holy Spirit, our work is mere motion. Even if we accomplish something, it won't be transformational. It is the Holy Spirit who prepares us and makes our communication transformational, during and even after our encounters with children, teens, and adults. What differentiates between effective and transformational communication is the Holy Spirit. Transformational communication can include preaching the gospel, but it is also more generic, from individual conversations to class lectures, anything that brings positive change for Christ. This change, a goal of communication, can come from something as small as greeting other people to becoming a mentor. What differentiates transformational communication from effective communication is the Holy Spirit, and the positive change resulting from it is not for self, but God.

The book is Christ-centered, emphasizing the word of God and the Holy Spirit as the foundation and our guide to the truth. Derr explores the Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, to make her point that only the Holy Spirit can speak to people's hearts and bring complete transformation in their lives. With many books on transformation available out there, the uniqueness of this one is that it solely focuses on communication. Whether we like it or not, we are communicating something all the time to the people around us, with or without words. If we can improve our communication, this can potentially improve all aspects of our lives.

Throughout the book, Derr goes through a step-by-step process for making transformational communication possible: (1) we must recognize that it is only possible through the power of the Holy Spirit; (2) before we approach others, we need to first seek personal spiritual transformation because we cannot transform others when we are not transformed; (3) afterward, we can build an authentic relationship with those we want to communicate with; (4) we need to understand the lives of others; (5) then we can prayerfully develop goals for the communication to meet their needs and assist in their growth; (6) next, we can engage in communication with proclamation, using creative and experiential techniques; (7) during and after the conversation, we should assess and evaluate its effectiveness and check whether the goals were met; (8) finally, we must recognize what the Holy Spirit has accomplished through us and always find something to celebrate, regardless of the outcome.

Derr simplifies this further into four parts: (1) foundations of transformational communication, which she emphasizes as the work of the Holy

Spirit (steps 1–3); (2) preparation for transformational communication, which means finding out about the listener (steps 4–5); (3) engagement in transformational communication, exploring various communication methods to best assist the listener (step 6); and lastly, (4) assessing and evaluating transformational communication (steps 7–8).

Each chapter starts with a brief outline of what it pertains to and ends with a conclusion to summarize the chapter, followed by short questions for the readers to further reflect on. These questions are helpful for small group discussions. However, Derr also poses many questions throughout the chapters, and they are not answered. This can leave the readers bewildered. On the other hand, the book is easy to read. It does not use religious jargon, and anyone, professional or nonprofessional, will find it helpful to improve their communication. Derr asserts that it is everyone's responsibility to answer God's call to make disciples. This requires the ability to communicate. Christian communication is not only teaching God's Word but also involves relationships. Derr suggests that God's communication to us started from understanding where we are and our conditions and touching every aspect of our lives through the life of Jesus. She then models the biblical approach God used to communicate to his people by delineating the communication steps, as previously mentioned, so that readers can follow them in their interactions with children, youth, and any family member.

She also adds the psychological and physiological development of humans to explain each communication step from a scientific point of view. Derr summarizes the stages of human development in a simple way to ensure that they are easy to understand. Nevertheless, incorporating every step of the communication procedure seems daunting and unrealistic. We normally do not think about these steps in our casual conversations with friends and families, but Derr argues that for successful communication to occur, all the factors need to be considered. This can be too technical for daily conversation, and it can even be unrealistic to apply in every interaction. However, the knowledge of these steps is at least important if someone wants to be intentional about enhancing communication. The process also points out which areas of our communication need more attention and improvement. These steps are not there to overwhelm the speaker but as guidance for them to become a better communicator.

The book is more practical than theological, more mission-oriented than academic, and more of a self-help book than a textbook. It helps readers to self-reflect on their communication with others, and it provides methods to improve each step so that others can pay more attention to your communication and have a desire to listen to you. Ultimately, the steps aim to transform lives via effective conversations.

As the title of the book implies, Derr focuses on how to approach children. She was a children's pastor, so it is evident that her personal stories

and experiences reflect reaching and dealing with teens and youth more than adults. One downside of her stories is that when she names biblical characters such as Joseph, Jonah, and Jesus as examples, she assumes that readers know the stories. So people who do not have basic Bible knowledge may find some of the examples hard to follow.

There are a few things Derr can improve on in the book. One point is clarifying the difference between developing a relationship with the listener in ch. 3 and knowing the individuals in the audience in ch. 4. It seems that developing a relationship is building trust by showing love and care, whereas knowing the individual is learning more facts about them and their circumstances. It would have been helpful if she had clarified the distinction between the two because developing a relationship can equate to knowing the individual.

The second and perhaps most confusing part of the book is the proclamation step of communication. Derr suggests developing tailored goals for each individual before communication starts. Examples of these goals are: identifying a specific way to help others, signing up to serve as a mentor, setting a specific number of church attendances, or setting a specific number of prayers each day. These are specific goals, yet when Derr spells out the next step of engaging the communication, what to proclaim and how to proclaim with these specific goals in mind, she suddenly shifts to the generic proclamation of the gospel, God's work, and the salvation message. These themes are unspecific and abstract topics, and it is difficult to connect how proclaiming God's work can transition to signing up to serve as a mentor. More should have been done to integrate this information into the major goal of the book.

Lastly, she lists numerous possible scenarios where things could go unexpectedly wrong in communication. Even the most prepared communication will indeed encounter sudden obstacles, and we need to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us through. However, the majority of the book is dedicated to delineating the steps we can take for better communication. Therefore, rather than simply leaving the matter to the Holy Spirit to meet all the unexpected situations, it would have been helpful if she had offered corresponding solutions for how to respond to her specific list of unexpected situations. It is one thing to simply give a warning, but another more helpful thing would have been for her to describe the unexpected situation with suggested solutions. Then readers could anticipate how to respond to these possible scenarios.

Nevertheless, the book makes it clear that the foundation of transformational communication is the work of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the day, it is the role of the Holy Spirit that convicts our hearts and guides us to the truth, and it is our privilege to be a part of and play a role in transforming someone's life as they grow in Christ. Therefore, we must create space in every step of our communication and allow the Holy Spirit to work in both the speaker and the listener's heart, even if we have to abandon our well-

prepared script and plans because, as Derr mentions, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who transforms, not us. For that reason, we are called to live lives that proclaim the power of the Holy Spirit, lives where we actively pursue personal transformation so that we can be effective tools to communicate with and transform our children, youth, and families.

Overall, I felt this book helps refocus our attention on what is most important in our communication—the Holy Spirit. Those who are knowledgeable in the topic of communication may find the book to be at an introductory level, but Derr’s perspective from a children’s pastor’s view can provide valuable insight to those who lead children and youth in the church.

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Eastman, David L. *Early North African Christianity: Turning Points in the Development of the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021. 174 pp. Paperback. USD 21.99.

David Eastman has written a well-organized introduction to early Christianity in Roman North Africa. In his first chapter, he clarifies what he means by “Early North African Christianity.” Based on the geopolitical divisions of the provinces in the Roman Empire, Eastman explains to his readers that Africa, for the Romans, did not include Egypt, but it was a label used for the northern coast of the continent west of Egypt (1). So this is not a book on Christianity in the continent of Africa, as defined in modern maps, but only one region of it. From the outset, I noticed that Eastman’s objective would be one of simplifying and explaining the history. Through the ample use of primary sources, he explains who is who, where is where, and what is what, not assuming that his readers know who Tertullian was, where Numidia is, or what a *libellus* was. I could not put the book down even though I am familiar with this history as a PhD student in early Christianity. His style is very engaging. The language is informal but elegant. He writes as if he is telling a story to a young Christian who is not familiar with the church’s historical roots. As I read the book, I often imagined Eastman in front of me, sitting on my couch and talking to me. For this accomplishment alone I congratulate the author (and editors). This book is a great option for students of early Christianity. It is concise, and it covers the most important issues of Christianity in this period.

Eastman selected a few characters to tell his history of Roman African Christianity up to the fifth century: Perpetua and Felicity (Part 1), Tertullian (Part 2), Cyprian of Carthage (Part 3), the Donatists (Part 4), and Augustine of Hippo (Part 5). The book is divided into five parts, each one containing three chapters. The first chapter of each part introduces the main character(s) in their historical context (entitled *The Life and Times of*). In the second and