CHANGING MEDIA AND THE CHANGELESS MESSAGE: SHARING THE GOSPEL

THROUGH NEW MEDIA

BY

DANIEL R. SCHMIDT, JR.

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

DR. WADE JOHNSTON

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

MARCH 18, 2021

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

For longer than we may realize, technology has been involved in the transmission of God's Word. Early Christin communities were united through a piece of technology—a book. During the Reformation, Luther and the other reformers used the printing press to spread their ideas across Europe. What about today? How can congregations effectively use the resources and technology that are available to them to share the gospel? This thesis seeks to explore how congregations and individuals might use "new media" as they carry out the mission to make disciples of all nations. The thesis starts by looking at the early uses of technology in the church. Following that it will look at the unique place the Lutheran church has in the realm of technology and how it can best be used today.

INTRODUCTION

"After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Col 4:16 NIV). These were Paul's instructions to the congregation in Colossae. He was not content to have his message heard in only one place. He wanted his message to be broadcast throughout the region, so he gave instructions that his letter be shared in other places. Throughout his ministry, Paul used a simple piece of technology, a written letter, to share the gospel with people all over the Mediterranean world.

This thesis deals with a similar topic: the transmission of God's Word through the means that are available to us today, specifically using the tools and opportunities available through technology. This thesis will demonstrate that this was a precedent set by the early church and then during the Reformation through the use of the printing press. It will examine the interplay between the gospel and technology, the challenges that are encountered when one tries to integrate technology into ministry, and offer some practical thoughts on how these tools may be used by a congregation. I propose that Lutheran pastors and congregations can and should make use of the digital tools and resources that are available to them to preach and share the gospel with a world that needs to hear its message.

PART I: SETTING A PRECEDENT

Defining "Technology" and How It Relates to Media

It can be difficult to find one definition of technology. On the one hand, technology has been

viewed as nothing more than a tool used to serve the needs people have. People see a need

and they create something to fill that need. Nicholas Carr calls people who have this view of

technology "instrumentalists."[1] On the other hand, some have viewed technology as

something ultimately outside of human control. It is tied up with human culture in ways that

are not always evident to people. According to this approach, technology will keep on

advancing and humanity is incapable of preventing its advancement. Carr calls people with

this approach to technology "determinists."[2] With this view, technology is not solely a tool at

our disposal that helps us get things done, but technology impacts us. It shapes and changes

us and our culture. Technology, in short, affects the way we think about ourselves and the

world around us.

In the case of media, the former view has often dominated discussions. Media has

been seen as a tool to communicate a message to people.[3] But "this limited way of

understanding media was challenged toward the end of the twentieth century as questions

were asked of media that the instrumental models could not fully answer. For example, what

is the relationship between violence in media and violence in society?"[4]

Perhaps the answer does not lie in one definition over the other, but rather both

definitions working together.

---

1. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020), 46.

2. Carr, 46.

3. Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 20–21.

4. Campbell and Garner, 22.

> Both the instrumental and cultural approaches to media benefit when they are used together. The instrumental approach is useful in posing questions about the effects of communicating a message, while the cultural approach shapes questions about the societal environment that the process is located within. As with technology, media are simultaneously tools and environments.[5]

According to this approach, technology is both a tool that is used to help accomplish whatever goals we might have, but also something that changes the way we think and impacts the world around us. Having both the "instrumental" approach and "determinist" approach (or, as Campbell and Garner like to call it, the "cultural" approach) in mind when discussing media makes us aware that media technology is a powerful tool at our disposal. We should be thoughtful when it comes to using these tools. They may allow us to solve certain problems in ways that were not possible in the past, but we also need to consider the impact using these technologies may have on us and the people around us.

The Early Church

Oral tradition was how the earliest followers of God heard his message. Before written text was widely available and readily accessible, the truths of God were handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Even when written traditions started to appear, there was still an emphasis on speaking the Word of God to people. When God gave Moses the written covenant law, Moses was told to take the law to the people and tell them what God had said and what God had written on the tablets of stone. Before the people of Israel entered the promised land, Moses delivered a sort of sermon to the people that is recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. The Old Testament prophets proclaimed God's Word in a similar way. They would receive a word from the LORD and the people of Israel were to listen to the words the prophet spoke. In many cases, these prophets also wrote down what the LORD

---

5. Campbell and Garner, 22.

spoke to them and what they said to the people. In the Old Testament, the Word of God was often something spoken by a prophet or messenger and heard by the people.

When Jesus lived and preached on earth, he would frequently use the Jewish Old Testament texts as a starting point for discussion. For example, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) was an explanation of the Old Testament law the people had often misunderstood. Jesus, however, never wrote down his words, at least not for posterity's sake. Everything we can be certain Jesus taught, he spoke. Speech was his tool when communicating with people.

When it was time for Jesus's apostles to go and preach the gospel to people, they adopted the same model as Jesus. They would preach and teach people using the biblical texts the Jewish communities were familiar with. Over time the work of the apostles also came to include the written word. They would write letters to congregations and those letters would, in turn, be read to the congregations so they could hear what the apostles had to say. Some of these letters were circulated to other congregations in the area (Col 4:16). The "voice" of the disciples was able to be heard in places they were not able to reach on their own.

These letters, along with the narrative accounts of Jesus's life and the Old Testament Jewish texts, came to form the basis of authority for the Christian community that was formed throughout the Mediterranean world. This physical collection of written texts formed a codex, a precursor of the book. Christians recognized the importance of the works contained in the codex and for them this was more than a collection of stories. This was the sacred Word of God. In some cases, the protection and preservation of these works resulted in martyrdom for Christians. "The adoption of the papyrus codex…marked the acceptance of a particular expression of media technology that became a significant part of Christian identity and the Christian church."[6]

---

6. Campbell and Garner, 25.

For centuries, the written word continued to spread and set the standard for Christian doctrine and practice. Since the majority of people were unable to read, the word was read and spoken to people. They had no other choice than to listen to what God's Word said as it was read to them. A piece of media technology, specifically a book, was having an impact across cultures and geography.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire, literacy rates fell. The written word was left to the care of the Roman Church, especially the monasteries. For hundreds of years, the Word of God was under the control of a select few. They became the primary authorities on matters of religion until the advent of the printing press and the production of the Word in the language of the people. But even as the ones holding most of the authority in this area, they were not necessarily always knowledgeable or correct sources of authority.

Development of the Print Industry

From a purely human perspective, one could argue that without the printing press the Reformation would not have happened. At the very least, it would have looked very different if it had not been for innovations in print that occurred just before Martin Luther came onto the scene. "Luther, like most of the great figures in history, was also very lucky…. When Luther first spoke out against indulgences, Europe was beginning to embrace, albeit with some caution, a new and powerful communication process, the printing press."[7] Luther and his fellow reformers made the most of the new technology that was at their disposal and used it to circulate ideas that changed the landscape of religious and political history. But when Luther arrived in Wittenberg in 1508 to be a professor at the newly established University of Wittenberg, the print industry there was in a much different state than it was when he left.

---

7. Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe—and Started the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), xi.

In the mid-1440s, Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable type printing press. A new way to print and publish books had been developed. Up to this point, books were made entirely by hand. Those interested in new books would seek out respected print shops or take texts they already owned to scribes so they could be reproduced. Not long after creating this new technology, Gutenberg set to work on printing a Bible.[8] It was met with enthusiasm, but this endeavor revealed a problem that would exist in the print industry for quite some time. It was not an economically viable business. For quite some time there was not a market for the buying, selling, and trading of books. Gutenberg went bankrupt and his Bible was the only lasting, meaningful thing he would ever produce. Even though it was not yet clear how to best use and monetize the new technology, rulers throughout Europe were eager to establish printing presses for the lands they controlled. It wasn't until the wealthy merchants of Europe became involved in the business of books that the industry began to grow.[9]

From the start, books were printed throughout Europe, but the majority came from just twelve cities and six of them were in Germany—Augsburg, Nuremberg, Cologne, Strasbourg, Basel, and Leipzig. All of these were large cities.[10] These areas had populations that were more literate than the rural areas and therefore more likely to buy books and literature. Being in the city also gave presses the ability to participate more easily in the distribution of books to other parts of Europe. In a landscape that already had its share of established and capable locations to produce books, it seemed like an impossibility that Wittenberg, a small town in Saxony, would rise to prominence in the industry.

Print in Wittenberg Before 1517

---

8. S.H. Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), 18.

9. Pettegree, 9.

10. Pettegree, 10.

Nikolaus Marschalk, one of the earliest professors at the University of Wittenberg, brought the first printing press to Wittenberg and printed his first books in 1502. But Marschalk operated the press with little success and after two years left the university. Marschalk did, however, leave the press behind. The press would change hands a few more times with results that were not much different than those of Marschalk. Eventually, Johann Rhau-Grunenberg took over the press's operation and stuck with it.[11]

The press in Wittenberg was never really in a position to succeed. Wittenberg had entered the print business much later than the cities that became the print centers of Germany. These large print shops had access to resources and typefaces that Wittenberg did not. Other print shops were operated by businessmen, merchants, and people dedicated to the craft of print. Wittenberg's press was run by members of the university faculty. For the most part, the press in Wittenberg handled the simple day-to-day items of the university. It made no sense to ask Rhau-Grunenberg to produce more substantial work. When something more substantial was needed, the professors at Wittenberg would go through the more established and professional shops that had already made their mark in the industry. There was also no reason to print materials in the vernacular since Wittenberg was a small town at the time and there was little demand for printed literature.[12]

Indulgences and Tetzel

Change was on the horizon for Wittenberg. Johann Tetzel was traveling through Germany selling indulgences to raise money for the construction project happening at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. While Tetzel never preached on indulgences in Wittenberg or Electoral Saxony, he was in places close enough to Wittenberg that Luther saw the effect Tetzel was

---

11. Pettegree, 39–40.

12. Pettegree, 40–41.

having on the laity. They would travel to these nearby locations where Tetzel was preaching and selling, buy indulgences, and return to Wittenberg.[13]

Luther had spoken on the evils of indulgences before this time, but Tetzel's activity nearby led him to take on the issue more seriously and directly. On October 31, 1517, Luther posted ninety-five theses for debate to the door of the castle in Wittenberg. These theses pointed out the places Luther saw the Roman Church erring. It would not take long for Luther's theses to be distributed elsewhere. Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Basel all printed editions of Luther's theses. This by itself was not unusual. It was important for the progress of higher academics that studies of this sort be widely distributed so they could be discussed more. What was unusual about Luther's theses is that they lasted beyond the academic setting they were intended for. Pettegree puts it this way:

> This sort of academic ephemera seldom attracted any notice outside the university where the disputation took place…Yet in Luther's case his theses on indulgences were reprinted three times, in three separate cities, including one (Nuremberg) that did not have a university. According to Luther's correspondents the Nuremberg press also published the theses in a German translation, though if this was the case no copies have survived. This, again, would be totally unprecedented. Something very unusual was going on.[14]

The printing press allowed Luther's ninety-five theses to spread far beyond the circles he had intended them for, but from this point onward Luther's call for reform among with Roman Church became a public event.

Luther's ninety-five theses had given him notoriety. It was his confrontation with Tetzel in 1518 that solidified him as the driving force behind the movement that was beginning to take place. Luther's theses demanded a response, and Tetzel and his fellow Dominican brothers were the first to react to what Luther said about indulgences. They prepared a set of countertheses in defense of indulgences which would be used in debate by

---

13. James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 103–104.

14. Pettegree, 75–77.

Tetzel. Luther, in turn, decided that he needed to give a response to Tetzel's defense. His response, however, was going to be different than what was the usual practice in academic settings. Instead of writing in Latin, Luther decided to write his response in German, the language of the people.[15]

Luther's response, the *Sermon on Indulgence and Grace*, was not all that important in moving discussions forward with Rome. It didn't deal so much with the deep theological questions that were raised by his ninety-five theses. Rather, it was aimed directly at the German people. Luther wrote in short, to-the-point sentences. He gave real, practical advice to people who had questions about indulgences. It was a hit. In Wittenberg, it was published at least twice, Leipzig reprinted it four times, and it was reprinted twice in Nuremberg, Augsburg, and Basel. "This set a pattern that would be followed for almost all of Luther's vernacular works for the following years of controversy: an instant, insistent demand for the Wittenberg originals, followed by immediate republication in the major citadels of German print."[16] By addressing the public and creating materials that could easily be reproduced at printing centers, Luther was able to spread his voice into parts of Germany that he never would have otherwise had the opportunity to reach.

Luther's decision to write the way he did was revolutionary. Before Luther, theological writing was dense and lengthy and not meant to be engaged by the wider public. Luther's writing would continue to be brief and easy to understand. This, for one, was what made Luther so successful. This is also what made his work attractive to publishers. They knew that whatever Luther wrote, people would buy. The risk was low since his work was short. It did not require months of work to print the materials he was producing. Luther's ability to adapt his writing for his targeted audience and publishers' eagerness to print his materials set the stage for a reformation in the church that would endure.

---

15. Pettegree, 79.

16. Pettegree, 80–81.

Quality Control

Luther was not only interested in the written word. He was also deeply invested in making

aesthetically pleasing materials. Many of Luther's contemporaries were content to write their

work, hand it off to a publisher, and be done with it. Luther was different. When it came to

the printing process, he was often involved from start to finish. He wanted to ensure that the

look of his works was on par with the content of what was inside of them.[17]

Early on this caused frustration for Luther. In Wittenberg, the only press he had

access to was operated by Johann Rhau-Grunenberg, and he was notoriously slow. He also

did not show much creativity in his work. The works he produced were more about function

with little consideration given to form. This might have been fine in a university setting

where students needed cheap materials for their studies, but for the things Luther wanted to

produce it was far from ideal.[18] Despite Rhau-Grunenberg's flaws and the frustration he often

caused for Luther, he was important for the beginning of Luther's cause and he was quick to

support Luther in his work. Throughout the Reformation, Luther would continue to give print

jobs to Rhau-Grunenberg.[19]

It soon became clear, however, that Wittenberg would need another print shop to

publish Luther's materials. Rhau-Grunenberg's pace and unimaginative work were not going

to be sufficient for the needs of a movement with the breadth of the Reformation. This

became evident in 1518. Luther had several original texts that needed to be printed, but Rhau-

---

17. Pettegree, 30.

18. Pettegree, 42.

19. Pettegree, 114.

Grunenberg was busy with other work. Luther turned to Leipzig for publication, specifically to Melchior Lotter.[20]

Lotter was established in the German print world when Luther reached out to him. There was, however, an obstacle in the way if he was going to print for Luther: Lotter had a good working relationship with the Roman Church. He had published works that opposed Luther. But a few weeks after being contacted by Luther, he was publishing for Luther.[21] The relationship between Luther and Lotter developed further when Lotter visited Wittenberg in 1519. On the visit, Lotter showed examples to Luther of what he thought he would be able to do with Luther's work. Lotter met Luther's demands for quality print jobs. Lotter was unable to move to Wittenberg to open up a new print shop himself, but he agreed to open a branch office there under the direction of Lotter's son. By the end of 1519, the new print shop was up and running in Wittenberg and by 1520 the shop was fully operational. This was the first step in expanding the print industry in Wittenberg to meet the demands of the ever-increasing work Luther was producing. It also ensured that Luther's works would have a high level of aesthetic quality to complement his written word.[22]

Luther's work reached an even greater level of visual appeal when Lucas Cranach joined the Reformation cause. Cranach had already made a name for himself in Wittenberg before he and Luther began to work with one another—he served as the court artist for the electors in Saxony. In the years following Luther's posting of his ninety-five theses, Cranach helped to make not just Luther's name, but also Luther's face well-known through Germany.[23]

---

20. Pettegree, 110.

21. Pettegree, 112.

22. Pettegree, 114.

23. Steven Ozment, *The Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 126–130.

Cranach's work went well beyond making sure people knew what Luther's face looked like. The two collaborated to create works of propaganda, depicting the ungodly behavior of the Roman popes throughout the centuries.[24] They also worked together to bring the stories of the Bible to life for the average person. What Luther did through preaching, Cranach did through woodcuts and art. "Thus did Luther and Cranach create an artistic style that allowed the congregation 'to see through the image to its didactic charge,' a transcendent experience of hearing and taking to heart unlike any other mundane oral, visual, or analytical process."[25]

Building the Church of the Reformation

The printing press enabled Luther to spread his message across Germany. The printing industry in Wittenberg continued to grow and Luther's writing spread through Germany and Europe. It became clear that what had started as an effort to reform the Roman Church had become its own unique Christian group. As more congregations splintered off from the Roman Church and joined the cause of the Lutheran Reformation, they needed guidance. Luther knew continuing education and instruction would be important if the movement he started was going to last, so he began to produce materials that could be used in congregations to inform both the clergy and the laity about what the Bible and the Lutheran movement taught.

The Diet of Worms ended with Luther being labeled a heretic and an outlaw. He was a wanted man. To protect him, Frederick the Wise decided it would be best for Luther to go into seclusion. Luther was taken to the Wartburg castle and from May 1521 to March 1522 he lived there under the name Junker Jörg. During his time at the Wartburg, Luther longed to be with and preach to the people he served as pastor. To make the most of his time alone, Luther

24. Ozment, 150.

25. Ozment, 134.

set to work on two major writing projects – his translation of the New Testament into vernacular German and a series of postils, or homilies. "These postils were guides to preaching on the scripture lessons prescribed for each Sunday and festival in the church year."[26] If he was not able to serve the spiritual needs of God's people in person, he at least could serve them in this way.

This project proved to be a difficult one, in part because Luther was not present to oversee and give instruction during the printing process as he was accustomed to doing. The project was first given to Rhau-Grunenberg, but it was obvious that he was incapable of meeting the requirements Luther demanded. He was furious with the quality of work he received from Rhau-Grunenberg and for a time Luther demanded that his postils no longer be printed. After calming down he changed his mind, but he made it clear that work was to be left in the hands of the far more capable Lotter, instead of Rhau-Grunenberg.[27] This was not a project Luther wanted to see completed sloppily. This was how Luther was going to broadcast his voice throughout Germany. If these materials were going to be used by pastors and congregations to continue the spread of Reformation theology, in Luther's opinion, they had to be made well. Luther understood that the life of the church centered around the Word of God, thus highlighting the importance of the sermon.[28]

Another work in continuing education came in 1528 and the years that followed. The Reformation had been moving forward for just over ten years, but there were still difficulties finding capable clergy to serve in the churches. To better understand what the state of Lutheran churches was in Germany, a series of visitations were scheduled. The first visits

---

26. Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 111.

27. Pettegree, 140.

28. Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 191.

were made by Melanchthon in Saxony. Luther also made visits to churches and schools in the area of Thuringia. Luther had this evaluation when he returned from his visits:

> To publish the Catechism, or Christian Doctrine, in this short, plain, simple form, I was impelled and constrained by the deplorable conditions which I recently observed during a visitation of the churches. Alas, Good Lord, of all the misery I saw! The people, especially in the villages, know nothing at all of Christian doctrine; and many pastors are sadly unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet all are called Christians, and have been baptized, and enjoy the use of the Sacrament, although they know neither the Lord's Prayer, nor the Creed, nor the Ten Commandments.[29]

Christian education had always been important to Luther. Already by 1525 he had written a short manual of prayers called the *Betbuchlein* and the preface to his *Deutsche Messe*,[30] but the situation he encountered in Germany made it obvious that something more serious was needed. So, in 1929, Luther set to work on his *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism*.

From a business perspective, the *Catechisms* were a success. The *Small Catechism* especially was printed in a variety of ways, including posters that could be hung on walls. These fostered learning among young people.[31] More important, of course, was the religious training people received through the *Catechisms*. The publication of this work allowed Christians to learn and relearn the fundamental teachings of the Bible.

Throughout his life, Luther took advantage of the chance to use a new form of technology, the printing press, and share his message. It was a way for Luther to let his voice be heard among the people of Germany and Europe, but it was never about him broadcasting his own message. It was about broadcasting *the* message. Using the printing press was simply a means to an end, but he did so using a medium that fit the message well. Luther used a tool, and it had real-world effects. The people of Germany and people still today had their lives

---

29. John P. Meyer, "Luther's Catechisms: 450 Years of Them" (essay presented before the South Atlantic District Pastor-Teacher Conference, 1979), 4.

30. Pettegree, 259.

31. Pettegree, 262.

transformed because a monk in a remote city in Germany decided to use the tools and media that were available to him to share and preach the message of the gospel.

PART II: NATURE OF THE GOSPEL AND TECHNOLOGY

Both God's law and gospel are his Word to us. The law shows us how we are sinners who have missed the mark of perfection that God demands of us. The law shows us the depths of our sin and how it has alienated us from God. The law, in short, reveals mankind's complete inability to save themselves.

This law, however, is not found only in God's written word. It is also found in the heart of each person. People across time and geography have generally had an innate understanding of what is right and what is wrong. People feel guilt and shame when they do something wrong. They demand justice when they see evil. They are constantly striving to better themselves and remove problems from the communities they live in. People tend to believe that if they just have the right rules and laws in place, then the world would finally be a place where everyone can live in peace and prosperity with one another. God's law is written on everyone's heart.

It's no wonder, then, that media is full of resources designed to help people better their lives and better serve the people around them. Self-help manuals are regularly at the top of Amazon's recommended books list, YouTube videos promising the key to a more efficient work schedule wrack up millions of views, and popular podcasts tell you how you can be a better man.[32]

These are often good resources and address many of the issues we see in society. And there certainly can be something gained from many of them. But they all have one thing in common—they offer only human solutions to the multitude of problems that are so evident in the world.

---

32. Search "The Art of Manliness" in your favorite podcast app.

If we are going to use the technologies and media that are available to spread God's Word, we need to understand what we are using them for. When Luther embarked on the task of reforming the church, it was not to push a personal agenda. It was not to tell people that Jesus had come, first and foremost, to be their role model or life coach. It was to share the life-giving message of the gospel with the world.

This is not to say that the law will be set aside if one decides to use technology as they share God's Word. The law is a fundamental part of Lutheran preaching and teaching. But the preaching and teaching the gospel as Lutherans teach it offers the chance to provide the ultimate solution to the questions that mankind wrestles with now and will continue to wrestle with into the future.

The Nature of the Gospel

The gospel is the word of God by which he proclaims the message of forgiveness to sinful people and declares them righteous, possible because of what Christ has done. The authors of the *Epitome* confessed it this way:

> The gospel is, strictly speaking, the kind of teaching that reveals what the human being, who has not kept the law and has been condemned by it, should believe: that Christ has atoned and paid for all sins and apart from any human merit has obtained and won for people the forgiveness of sins, "the righteousness which avails before God," and eternal life.[33]

This gospel, unlike the law which remains written on the hearts of people, is revealed only through the Holy Spirit. "'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived'—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit" (1 Cor 2:9, 10). By nature, sinful minds are opposed to the message that the gospel shares (1 Cor 1:18, 23).

---

33. Epitome to Formula of Concord, V. 3 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds*., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 500.

The purpose of the Spirit revealing the gospel is laid out in the Scriptures. The gospel justifies the sinner (Rom 3:21, 28), produces faith (Rom 10:17), and creates new life that enables one who has come to faith to live in the grace they have been shown. Through the gospel, God makes the unwilling willing. He takes hearts that were opposed to him and creates faith. He moves people on the path to hell and puts them on the road to heaven instead. Through the gospel, God proclaims the good news that his Son died to take the sins of the world upon himself.

God has chosen to distribute the gospel to us and create faith mediately, that is, through means. This doesn't mean that God could not work immediately in the hearts of people to create faith and believe the good news of the gospel. He is God and we do not tell God what he can and cannot do. But God has never given us a promise that he will work immediately. He has, however, given us a promise that he works mediately. "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21).

The means God uses to bring the gospel to people are the means of grace, that is, the gospel in Word and sacrament. The sacraments, Baptism and Lord's Supper, are physical, tangible materials connected with the Word of God that announce the forgiveness of sins. God also gives us the gospel in the Word, shared through preaching, teaching, and absolution.

From the very beginning, God decided he would use words to impact reality. He said "let there be" and there was. When the serpent tempted Adam and Eve and they fell into sin, God spoke judgement against the serpent and told him that one day he would crush his head, and thousands of years later God made good on his promise. It wasn't much different later in history. The only thing that changed was the person speaking. Instead of speaking himself, God spoke to his people through prophets and messengers.

It wasn't only the spoken word God used to communicate with people on earth. He also gave them his written word. He inspired human authors to put into writing his words, his thoughts, and his plans for mankind. Just as people heard the prophets speak God's Word, today when people open God's Word they hear God speak through those words. They hear his Word of the law that condemns and kills, but they hear God's greater word—his promise of forgiveness of sins and life forever because of the work of Christ. And now God sends his servants to go and speak, and share his Word with more people so that they too may hear the good news of the gospel and believe it.

The Nature of Technology

Whenever a new medium for communication is introduced, we tend to focus on the content we are receiving through the new medium. We don't usually think about the medium itself. In his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr explores the impact the internet and technology have on the way people think.[34]

As was mentioned at the start of this paper, in general, there are two views on technology. One group, Carr calls them "instrumentalists," says that technology is nothing more than a tool used to serve the needs that people have. If problems arise related to the use of technology, whatever that technology may be, it is because the tool was being used improperly. This is the most common view that people have. On the other side of the spectrum, the "determinists," say technology is actually outside of human control. It will continue to advance and mankind has no power to stop it. In the process, we are formed and molded by the technologies that enter our lives.[35]

---

34. Carr, 4.

35. Carr, 46.

Both sides can make arguments to support their case. On the side of the instrumentalists, if you look at any one point in history and the way people were using technology, it seems that people were making conscious decisions about how they would take advantage of and use the technology that was placed before them. Entire societies have done this. They decide not to use certain technologies because, for whatever reason, the technology available doesn't fit with their ideals.[36]

A more broad view of history may tell a different story. For example, when the mechanical clock was invented, it changed the way people thought. Before the clock, time was mostly tracked by the movement of the planets, moon, and stars. Time was kept, but not in the same way it is today. People's concept of time was broader and the way they lived their lives reflected this view of time.[37] But as the mechanical clock started to become more popular, people started to think about time differently. Clocks allowed people to create rigid schedules and make plans at specific times. As clocks got smaller and could be kept in a pocket or worn on a wrist, people were able to keep track of how they spent every moment of every day. "The 'personalization' of precisely measured time 'was a major stimulus to the individualism that was an ever more salient aspect of Western civilization.'"[38] If the creation and implementation of something as simple as the clock had that kind of impact on the way people think, it's reasonable to believe the internet is doing something similar to us today.

How the Internet is Changing Us

Before the rise of the internet, if you wanted to learn something, you needed to go through the right channels and consult experts in the field you were interested in. Compare to today.

---

36. Carr, 47.

37. Carr, 41.

38. Carr, 43.

Instead of contacting someone qualified to answer a question, we are more likely to pull out a smartphone and trust Google to give us the answer.[39] It's understandable why we do this. It's easier. It saves time. Why consult a professional when the internet can tell you everything you want to know in a few seconds?

While convenient, this also creates a problem. Access to the wealth of information provided by the internet creates a false impression that we know more than we do. Another problem lies underneath that problem. The information we find on the internet, to a large extent, is incorrect.[40] Anyone with a device connected to the internet can make their thoughts known. There are positives to this, of course. Real professionals and experts can share their ideas with people they may have never had the chance to meet in the offline world. But the internet is open to everyone. Someone with little to no credibility or experience can share their opinion on a topic, gain a following, and influence millions of people. "The communication revolution spawned by the computer and the Internet mirrors the upheaval generated by the invention of the printing press. Like the printing press, *digital technology is changing how we understand authority*."[41]

As I write this paper, it seems this sort of thing is playing out in real-time on a nationwide scale. When the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States around March 2020, government officials and healthcare professionals began advising the country on how to handle the situation. Schools closed, lockdowns were put in place, states enforced mask mandates, and leaders discouraged large social gatherings. Almost immediately there was backlash. People took to social media and, in some cases, the streets to make their complaints

---

39. Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105.

40. Nichols, 106.

41. Herbert Anderson, "What Are We Becoming with Our Technology? Implications for Religious Leaders," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 2011, https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/91, 7.

known publicly. As the pandemic has progressed, people have started to show distrust in what government officials and healthcare professionals tell them. When someone in authority implements a new regulation or shares a new piece of data, people are ready to react and challenge what has been said, citing whatever they found on Facebook or Google that day as their evidence. I mention this to illustrate the point Nichols makes. He says,

> The Internet is without doubt a great achievement that continues to change our lives for the better by allowing more people more access to information—and to each other—than ever before in history. But it also has a dark side that is exerting important and deeply negative effects on the ways people gain knowledge and respond to expertise.[42]

Public discussion and information found on the internet can be great tools for learning and information gathering, but there are potential downsides that need to be considered when everyone can broadcast their message online.

The internet is changing the way we think about authority. It is also changing the way we think about consuming media. In the past, you had to go to different outlets for different types of information and entertainment. You would watch TV for video content, you would listen to the radio for music and audio, and you would open a book to read. This changed with the internet and widespread access to the computer. Suddenly, through digital technology, everything was in one place. People could sit in front of the same screen and have all of the things that used to be in different places in one centralized location.[43]

This has resulted in people switching between tasks almost constantly. We can read a blog post for a few minutes, bring up a YouTube video, scroll through social media, and listen to a podcast all in one place and on one device. With so many options, people are more easily distracted and tend to prefer shorter, more bite-sized content. Carr describes his own experience this way: "Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in

---

42. Nichols, 108.

43. Carr, 90.

information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."[44]

The way the internet and digital media have changed the way we think may also depend on how a person came to interact with these things in the first place. There appears to be a difference between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants." Digital natives are people for whom digital communication and technology were part of their upbringing. For them, the things that the internet and digital technology offer are like a first language. They understand how to use these things without ever having been taught how to use them.[45] When they think about digital media and the physical world, there is no real difference. Their online world reflects the real world and vice-versa. They exist in both places simultaneously.[46] Digital immigrants, on the other hand, are those who learned how to use the technology that is common today later on in life.[47] They are more likely to see a difference between their digital world and their physical world.

It is difficult to deny that the internet and the other pieces of technology that accompany the internet have changed the way we think. With so much information available at their fingertips, people are more likely to think they know more than they really know and push back against traditional positions of authority and expertise. The rise in the internet has also changed the way we interact with media and think about content. People today often have more trouble focusing on one task at a time, and instead they spread their attention thin as they engage in multiple forms of media at the same time. With so much to engage with, they prefer media that is brief and to the point. These are issues that need to be acknowledged

---

44. Carr, 6–7.

45. Richard Nysse, "Learning from 'Digital Natives:' Forming a New Generation of Religious Leaders," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 2011, https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/91, 12.

46. Nysse, 18.

47. Nysse, 12.

and wrestled with if churches are going to decide to engage their communities through digital media.

Connecting the Gospel and Technology

It did not take long for people to see the potential of the internet and digital technology being used in the area of religion and worship. In *Creating Church Online*, author Tim Hutchings explores how religious groups have developed online.[48] This, however, is not an easy thing to trace. Many online religious groups have undoubtedly appeared and disappeared without leaving any kind of trace that they ever existed. The earliest religious group Hutchings was able to find came from a 1985 report by the Church of England. No name is given for the church and there is no explanation of what members actually did in this online community.[49]

Many online religious communities were similar to the one reported by the Church of England until the use of the internet expanded dramatically with the invention of the World Wide Web in 1990. The first church to be created on a website may have been the First Church of Cyberspace in 1994. This online congregation offered discussion forums and a chatroom to its members. Members could also access images, music, and a multimedia online Bible.[50] More complex communities began to spring up as the capabilities of the internet and digital media improved. For example, "Second Life," a three-dimensional online world where participants create digital avatars and engage with other players, allowed people to attend religious services seeking to resemble their real-world counterparts. Some of the online

---

48. Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community, and New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 10.

49. Hutchings, 10.

50. Hutchings, 12.

churches have even been known to perform traditional Christian rites like Baptism and Lord's Supper.[51]

From the mid-2000s to the present day, many local congregations have begun to incorporate "internet campuses" into their ministry. These congregations "combine high-quality video broadcasts of music and sermons with limited and closely monitored opportunities for response and extensive social media engagement."[52] In 2020, churches throughout the United States were forced to adopt something similar to this model if they had not already been making use of digital media and online resources. For several months, many congregations met exclusively online in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

Scholars are divided on what to make of the rise in online churches. Some see online religious communities as competition to the traditional church space. Their concern is that that online churches will slowly replace the local congregation. Others believe that these new media opportunities supplement the existing local church. Rather than replace the systems that are already in place, they expand the work of a local congregation. Still others see the use of media and technology as a way to attract and invite new people into physical church groups. The available new media opportunities serve as a tool for evangelism. Finally, some have suggested that the rise of the internet and online religion will completely change traditional beliefs and result in a new type of religion entirely.[53]

With such a wide range of opinions and the questions that naturally arise, it is clear that the use of digital media in the church is not an easy topic. Answers on how to handle these things will most often not be black or white. Rather than seeing things as one way or the other, it is best to search for a middle road. Digital technology, the internet, and new

---

51. Hutchings, 18–20.

52. Hutchings, 20.

53. A. Trevor Sutton, "Liminal Links: Church in the Digital Age," *The Cresset*, 2019, http://thecresset.org/2019/Michaelmas/Sutton_M19.html.

media are powerful tools that can have massive impacts on people. This is especially true when dealing with something as personal and intimate as someone's spiritual or religious identity. It is important, though, that congregations think about how they might best make use of these resources. Even if the decision is made not to use them, that decision is a reflection of how a particular congregation views and embraces the new media resources that are available.

PART III: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Acknowledging the Challenges of New Media

New media—computers, the internet, smartphones, social networks, podcasting, and more—offer an opportunity for congregations to engage with people in a way they may not have attempted in the past. But as is the case with anything that has potential benefits, some challenges and questions must be addressed.

As was noted in the previous section, the internet had led to people questioning conventional positions of authority. People are skeptical of anyone who claims to have the right answer. Academically trained clergy are no exception when it comes to this skepticism. This has always been true to some extent, but the ability to access large amounts of information whenever one wishes seems to have made this more common and people more open about their disregard for authority figures. When it comes to religion and spiritual matters, they may still have an interest, but they are more willing to listen to a variety of religious sources.[54] This presents a challenge for those who want to share the message of the gospel. Christians claim to have the one truth about life, death, and life after death. This is the exact opposite of the way many people think today.

Another challenge touched on in the last section was the issue of distractions and the inability of people to focus on one thing for long periods. This also could prove to be a challenge for sharing the gospel. Yes, the central message of the Bible is quite straightforward: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to save sinners. But the implications of that for daily life can be profound. There are so many other things that the Bible teaches apart from that central truth. Many of the truths in God's Word are not ideas that can be shared in a headline or a few minutes of content. Gospel proclamation takes time. The truths of the Bible

---

54. Pauline Hope Cheong, "Authority," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A Campbell (New Your: Routledge, 2013), 75.

touch every aspect of our lives. This requires ongoing conversation. It can require patience, both on the part of the one presenting the message and the one hearing the proclamation of God's Word. In an age where people are more prone to jump from one thing to another without slowing down to give an important question or concept serious thought, this has the potential to be a difficult task.

Connected to these previous two challenges seems to be another point. In the digital world, people can pick and chose what ideas they like and get rid of the ones they don't agree with. This fits quite nicely with the postmodern view that many people have today. Robert Fortner explains this thought nicely:

> The digital self combines quite nicely with the postmodern sensibility that questions all authority. No interpretation is sacred, unalterable, or superior to any other. If we take this perspective to its logical end, the result is the death of the meta-narrative— the great myths (including Christianity) that provide shape to our lives and world, provide an interpretive frame within which to understand existence, and give meaning to existence. "Why believe the Bible?" this logic would say. Why not simply pick and choose from any text (sacred or secular, fiction or nonfiction) that fits the existential moment and the requirements of that moment?[55]

There is so much information available and there are so many ideas for people to consider. This information overload enables them to take what they see as the best of each idea and implement it in their life for as long as it seems helpful.

When Luther used the printing press to share his message, it wasn't an end in and of itself. It was a means to an end. His real goal was to share the message of the gospel with people in a way that would impact their lives and the way they lived. As Tim Hutchings demonstrated, when using digital technology, the danger can be that people see the digital resources available to them as an alternative form of worship and study of God's Word. Why go to a physical church or join a congregation when you can get everything you want online and from the comfort and security of your own home? It is easier for most people to commit

---

55. Robert S. Fortner, "Shifting Sensibilities: Some Consequences of Digital Technology," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 2011, https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/91, 39.

to watching a YouTube video on their couch or listening to a podcast while they do chores around the house than it is for them to go to a physical location with other people at a set time and in a set place. And even when engaging with media in this way, people still find themselves by something else online that grabs their attention.

The issue of quality can also be a difficult one when using digital media. It's easy to say that you want to do something. It's another thing to do it well. When Luther went about printing his writing, he made sure that it was done well and was frustrated when things did not meet his standard for excellence. He understood a person could write something profound and important, but if it was presented in a way that was unattractive to the eye, the likelihood of people paying attention to it went down. In the same way, a church website or YouTube channel might be filled with useful resources, but if the aesthetic appeal doesn't engage the target audience, the content may be overshadowed by its presentation.

Addressing the Challenges of New Media

There will most certainly be challenges if one decides to use digital resources and new media in ministry. The challenges, however, ought not to keep us from looking for ways to engage and interact with people online. First, it is important to remember what our foundation is when we use these things. It is not to promote ourselves or push our own agenda. It is to share God's Word. It is to broadcast the message of the gospel. And that message is always powerful and it is always efficacious (2 Tim 3:15). God makes a promise that where his Word is proclaimed, it will have an effect and it will work where and when it pleases God.

Authority

The first issue on the topic of authority seems to be the most glaring and difficult one to address. It has become so embedded in our culture to question those in authority. People are

constantly being told to "live their truth." No one is supposed to tell another person that what they are doing or saying is incorrect. Another way to put it: you can do just about whatever you want and no one can tell you otherwise. This is a difficult problem for Christians to deal with, and it doesn't only apply to the digital space. It's all around us. So what are Christians to do about it?

The simplest answer is to continue sharing the gospel with people. The gospel is what creates faith. The gospel is what takes skeptics and turns them into believers. When the Apostle Paul was on his missionary journeys he met skeptics all along the way. People sent him and his message away all over the world, but he continued to preach the message of Jesus. Even if most rejected what he said, there were still always those who heard the gospel and believed what he had to say. They turned from their former ways of life and followed the one true God (1 Thess 1:9).

When people question authority, it is also wise to understand the point of view they are coming from. Again turning to Paul, we see him do just that in Acts 17. In Athens, there were skeptics everywhere. The people of Athens were interested in all different kinds of knowledge and ideas. When Paul had the chance to address them, he spoke to them in a way they could relate to. He showed them that he and they had more in common than they might have initially realized. He referenced ideas and philosophies they were familiar with. In the end, most of the people in Athens rejected what Paul had to say but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject" (Acts 17:32).

What does this mean for those hoping to share the gospel through digital media? Be aware of the culture you live in. Understand the way people in your area think and know the problems they have, and then do your best to address the culture, problems, and questions in a way that shows you have thought about them too. Make it clear that your faith impacts the way you approach and think about them. Many may still not listen to what you have to say,

but there is always the chance that someone will hear the message you are sharing and want to know more.

Distractions and Focus

As Nicholas Carr pointed out in *The Shallows*, one of the problems the internet and new media have presented is the issue of distractions. It appears it has become harder for people to focus on complicated tasks for extended lengths of time. One solution to this is to modify the content you produce to fit the way people are thinking. This is the route many in entertainment have gone.[56] In a sense, this is what Luther did too.

Up until Luther, religious materials were full of technical vocabulary and written in Latin. Luther decided to change the way he would write theological material. He opted to use the language of the people, German, and he wrote in a way that could be understood by almost anyone. The core message of what he was saying remained the same; he didn't compromise the message. What he did do was present his message to people in a way he knew they would be more willing and able to engage in.

Today, if digital resources are going to be used by the church, perhaps that means creating shorter content, depending on the type of digital media being used. For example, suppose a pastor or congregation wanted to release a video explaining the Lutheran understanding of baptism. If released as a single video, this would likely be a lengthy piece of content. But what if instead of one long video, the discussion were broken up into smaller pieces and released as a series of videos? There is no guarantee this would increase engagement, but the trends explained by Carr would seem to imply that this type of presentation might be one people are more willing to engage with. Pastor Jon Hein uses an illustration that makes a helpful point when it comes to our presentation of the gospel:

---

56. Carr, 95.

> Take all the vitamins and nutrients you need to survive. I can give that to you in two possible ways. Your choice: I can pack those nutrients into three large, bitter pills which you take throughout the day…OR… I can cook you three delicious, well-balanced meals. Both methods have the same ability to maintain your health. But one method is going to be better received than the other.[57]

This way of sharing the gospel would not have to compromise the message that is being shared, it would simply serve it to people in a way they are more comfortable with.

Another consideration when dealing with issues of focus and distraction is the type of content being used. Since video content has to be accessed with a user actively using an internet-connected device, it opens the door for them to shift their attention. They might start with a video, but then they change to some other form of digital media. Compare this to what could be called a more passive form of digital media, the podcast.

A podcast is a digital audio file a user downloads to a personal device and listens to whenever they want. Often, podcasts feature one or more hosts discussing a topic of their choice. They allow listeners to listen in on a conversation. Video certainly can offer this experience, but, unlike video, podcasts allow users to listen in situations that require some level of attention, but not their complete attention. Users can listen to podcasts as they drive to work, do chores around the house, and all the other menial (but essential) tasks that happen during any given day.

Length also doesn't appear to be a problem for those who listen to podcasts. For example, two shows, "The Joe Rogan Experience" and "Dan Carlin's Hardcore History," regularly feature episodes that are several hours long, yet they are consistently at the top of podcast rankings when it comes to downloads and popularity. It is not uncommon for the many of most popular podcasts available today to have episodes spanning an hour or more.

In a time when so many forms of digital media have been cut down to headlines and clickbait, podcasts remain, it seems, to be one of the few places where people are still willing

---

57. Jonathan Hein, "Treasures in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God's Plan of Salvation" (essay presented to the Institute of Worship and Outreach, 2011), 15.

to engage with long-form content. With this in mind, podcasts could be an excellent way for pastors to support ongoing Christian education in their congregation. It gives them the ability to share their thoughts and the truths of God's Word with the people they have been called to serve, even if they aren't able to be with them in-person.

Finally, when it comes to addressing issues of attention and focus, there's something to be said concerning the responsibility of the hearer. Communication is a two-way street. The person listening is expected to be active and engaged in what is being talked about, even if they are not directly active in the conversation. This means thinking about what is being said rather than just hearing bits and pieces of what a person wants to hear.[58] If this is true of everyday conversations and the media we consume, it's certainly true when it comes to listening to God's Word. It may be wise to remind people of Luther's explanation to the Third Commandment: "We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it."[59]

<div align="center">Multitude of Ideas</div>

The internet has given people access to a plethora of ideas. This goes for religious ideas, too. People take what they consider to be the best qualities of a particular idea or religious belief and incorporate it into their own lives. When it comes to using digital media and the internet to share the gospel, how do we avoid making Christianity a grab-bag that people can pick and choose from?

The message of the Bible is a comprehensive one that touches many different parts of our lives. The central message of the Bible is that Jesus the Son of God came to die for sins, but it has so much more to teach people than just that message. Digital media gives the

---

58. As a responsible resident of planet earth, that is probably what you should generally do with almost everything.

59. Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 59.

chance to place lots of different materials in one easily accessible place for people to engage with. Over time, a digital catalog can be built. This could serve a dual purpose. It would allow those who may be interested in knowing more about your congregation to learn something about what you teach and believe before they ever walk in the door. It could also serve as a resource for those already in the church. If people have questions about a particular teaching or doctrine that Lutherans believe, it would be a spot for them to find the information they are looking for and go "down the rabbit hole" as far as they like.

Move to Digital Only

One of the concerns that some have when it comes to digital media is that it will replace the physical gathering of believers. This is an important thing for churches to think about if they use digital resources. The gathering of believers in a physical location at an agreed time and place is an important thing to retain. It allows believers to encourage one another and build each other up in the faith. As the author of the Hebrews said, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:24, 25).

Some things happen in a physical worship setting that can't be replicated online. Baptisms do not happen over the internet. They happen with the Word and water applied to a recipient. Lord's Supper is a gathering of believers where they receive the forgiveness of sins through the body and blood of Jesus and express their common faith with one another.

It seems, however, that this concern may not have much support. Rather than using online and digital religious materials, for many, online and offline religious experiences intersect with one another. "Scholars noting the connection between religion online and offline have argued that, for many, online religious practice may simply be an extension of

offline religiosity."[60] In other words, the new media space is used to supplement the experiences people are already having in real life, not replace them.

<div align="center">Quality</div>

Finally, the visual and audio quality of things put online needs to be considered. Perform a search on YouTube and it becomes clear that high-quality videos attract more views and interaction. The same goes for podcasts that have high-quality audio. Fortunately, making high-quality content is not as difficult as it was in the earlier days of digital media.

Almost all of the smartphones released in the last several years have cameras that can record video in high-definition. Apple claims that its most recent iPhone can record video that rivals that of professional movie cameras.[61] With an influx of people recording video, video editing software has become more user-friendly for those who have little to no video editing experience. Website appearance is something else worth thinking about when it comes to online content. Services like Squarespace and Wix allow people with little to no website building experience to create high-quality, yet affordable websites.

Recording high-quality audio also has become easier to do in recent years. Free computer software programs like Audacity allow users to record and edit their voice and microphones continue to decline in price as more and more people purchase them. Now more than ever before, anyone with a smartphone, a laptop, and a microphone can enter the digital media space and release content on the internet.

---

60. Campbell and Garner, 76.

61. https://www.apple.com/iphone-12-pro/

PART IV: POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS OF NEW MEDIA

There are no doubt challenges to face when it comes to the internet, digital media, and trying to use them in ministry. There is also potential to reach new people with the message of the gospel and build the faith of those already in the church. If a congregation or pastor decides that they want to implement these new forms of communication into their ministry, how might they go about doing that? It will look different in every situation and some congregations may decide not to use digital technology at all, but I would like to offer some possible applications to consider.

Supplement Worship

A pastor will spend hours in his office preparing next week's sermon. He looks at the text in its original language, finds the main point of the text, considers how the other appointed lessons for that Sunday connect to the lesson being preached on, and searches for applications and illustrations to help connect the Word with the people. This all happens before he writes his sermon. When he does finally write his sermon, much of the study and research he did ultimately does not end up being preached when Sunday morning finally comes. Something he came across in his study may be interesting, but it does not always translate well to the pulpit.

In many congregations, there are going to be people who want to dig deeper than what happens on Sunday morning. New media could give a pastor the chance to share what he learned through his personal study with the people he has been called to serve. The interesting piece of information or historical data he came across during his study might not have made a lot of sense to take into the pulpit, but it might be something that people would be interested to hear in a podcast or YouTube video on their own time or while they're commuting to work on Monday morning while the sermon is still fresh in their mind. This

could also be an opportunity to reinforce ideas and applications that were made in the sermon on Sunday. Another possibility could be to take a look at the lessons that were not preached on for a given Sunday. Even though a pastor didn't preach on those lessons, he likely took a look at them and thought about how they related to the lesson he was preaching on.

Supplement Bible Study

Similar to worship, when a pastor decides on a topic to teach in Bible study there is going to be a lot of prep work involved that never makes it into the actual Bible study. Podcasts and YouTube could be a chance to engage with those topics more than forty minutes to an hour might allow.

It might also be wise to consider that a small number of members in WELS churches regularly attend Bible classes. According to the 2019 WELS Statistical Report, on average fifteen percent of adult members attend Bible classes.[62] Ideally, members would attend in-person Bible studies, but if they are not, it is still important for them to learn about the topics that get covered in a Bible study setting. Group Bible study offers the chance to talk about topics that might be difficult to talk about in the pulpit. A podcast or YouTube series might give people the chance to learn about those same topics at their own convenience and their own pace. It might even pique their interest to attend an in-person Bible study on Sunday morning.

Outreach and Evangelism

A final possible application would be using new media as an evangelism tool. Today, when people are looking for a new potential church, one of the first things they are likely to do is visit the church's website. They want to see what kind of things the church teaches and

---

62. "WELS Statistical Report: 2019", https://mcg.welsrc.net/download-mcg/wels-statistical-report-2019/?wpdmdl=3615&ind=1585589498919, 1.

values. They may look to see if the congregation posts their sermons online. Using new media could be a chance to "get your foot in the door" with people that you never were trying to reach out to in the first place. They saw your content online, it sparked an interest for them, and then they decided to give an in-person experience a try.

In Sharpsburg, Georgia, for example, Pastor Jon Schroeder has been posting sermon videos online for a little over ten years. Collectively, these videos have thousands of views and many of the people who are members of the congregation today watched a sermon online before they ever stepped foot inside the doors of the church building. They watched a video online, they connected with it, and then they wanted to find out more. New media and digital technology allow congregations to reach out to their community without them even having to leave the door of their church.

CONCLUSIONS

Martin Luther used a new piece of technology, the printing press, to share his message with Germany and the rest of Europe. His ideas weren't simply dead words on a page that didn't do anything. They sparked the beginning of a complete change in religious ideas and thought.

Today we have similar but even more powerful technology than the printing press at our disposal. The internet allows information to be shared with people all across the world in a matter of seconds. It has changed how people think, in both positive and negative ways. People have access to more information than any other point in history, which all means access to false information and destructive ideas. The internet has brought many challenges with it, but now that it's here, it's here to stay. It's impossible to go back to a time without it.

Despite the challenges the internet and new media present, it offers great benefits for those who wish to proclaim and share the message of the gospel. These new forms of media fit incredibly well with how God's Word works and how Christians have historically experienced God's Word – through hearing. Lutherans, who since the very beginning have always placed proclamation of the gospel at the forefront of their work, have a unique opportunity to use these platforms and proclaim the gospel in a new and unique way.

New media also has the potential provide an opportunity to build connections with people. 2020, and now the start of 2021, has shown us that people long for personal connections. Online video, podcasts, and other forms of new media will never be able to fully satisfy the desire for face-to-face human interaction, but they allow us to cultivate a sense of relationship with people we may not be able to see otherwise.

If it's here to stay, how do Christian congregations approach this topic? Will they make use of the technologies that are available to them or will they avoid them? These are questions congregations will have to wrestle with, but to avoid them completely may be to neglect a tool that has the potential to have a massive impact on people.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Herbert. "What Are We Becoming with Our Technology? Implications for Religious Leaders." *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31.1 (2011): 6–10.

Campbell, Heidi A, and Stephen Garner. *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.

Carr, Nicholas. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Cheong, Pauline H. "Authority." Pages 72–87 in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. Edited Heidi A. Campbell. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Fortner, Robert S. "Shifting Sensibilities: Some Consequences of Digital Technology." *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31.1 (2011): 35–42.

Hein, Jonathan. "Treasures in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God's Plan of Salvation" (essay presented to the Institute of Worship and Outreach, 2011).

Hutchings, Tim. *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community, and New Media*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Kittelson, James M. *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

Kolb, Robert. *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.

Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert. *The Book of Concord*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.

Luther, Martin. *The Small Catechism*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017.

Meyer, John P. "Luther's Catechisms: 450 Years of Them" (essay presented before the South Atlantic District Pastor-Teacher Conference, 1979).

Nichols, Tom. *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Nysse, Richard. "Learning from 'Digital Natives:' Forming a New Generation of Religious Leaders*." Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 31.1 (2011): 11–19.

Ozment, Steven. *The Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe—and Started the Protestant Reformation.* New York: Penguin Press, 2015.

Steinberg, S. H. *Five Hundred Years of Printing.* Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969.

Sutton, A Trevor. "Liminal Links: Church in the Digital Age." *The Cresset* 83.1 (2019): 19–26.