Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

This ministry focus paper entitled

GOD'S VOICE FOR THE DIGITAL AGE:
BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN A WIKIPEDIA WORLD

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

has been accepted by the Faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

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Date Received: December 13, 2013

GOD'S VOICE FOR THE DIGITAL AGE:
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A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

GARRETT BROWN
OCTOBER 2013

ABSTRACT

God's Voice for the Digital Age:
Biblical Authority in a Wikipedia World
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2013

The present influence of new media and digital democracy in shaping information, requires the evangelical church to pioneer new approaches of framing biblical revelation and authority in order to engage in effective mission in the twenty-first century. As society confronts the implications of the Information Age, the Church faces societal shifts that intersect with its mission. The new digital media are changing how society communicates ideas and explores knowledge. Internet outlets, such as Google, Wikipedia, and Twitter, exert an increasing influence over epistemological issues concerning how knowledge is sought and deciphered, and how justified belief is distinguished from social construction.

Such influence poses a challenge to the Church's mandate to proclaim the Word of God. The postmodern generation of Christian leaders finds its claim to revealed knowledge marginalized and dismissed as irrelevant and outdated. Members of the digital generation thrive on decentralized authority, democratic knowledge base, and truth as a process of discovery. The Church's traditional framing of authority and truth is in danger of missing the generative ethos of the time. This paper will offer an examination of these cultural reverberations and the challenge posed to the Church. As the heart of technological innovation, special emphasis will be given to California's Silicon Valley and the unique opportunity afforded to its churches to foster a practice of discovery and decentralized authority within their appeal to biblical truth.

The paper will consist of three parts; the first will offer the context of this ministry challenge, looking at the philosophical and cultural factors involved. The second provides theological reflection of biblical authority and revelation from ancient through modern teaching of the Church. The third part explores a reframed ministry strategy for biblical dialog within the environment of digital natives, recognizing recent cultural influence, while maintaining the absolute and singular voice of God.

Content Reader: Craig Detweiler, PhD

Word Count: 300

To John Lyall Brown and Cleda Sullivan Dente, my father's father and mother's mother, holding fast to the Word of Life

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INTRODUCTION

When eccentric game designer Jason Roher awarded his a USB drive containing his most recent creation to Chinese computer programmer Jia Ji, few properly appreciated the reverberations that would emerge through *Chain World*. Even so, rarely does the birth of a new religion generate immediate recognition and acceptance. *Chain World*, the world-building brainchild of Roher, is by fair estimation a religion with its own mythology, ritual, and ethic. The winner of the 2011 Game Design Challenge at the Game Developers Conference in San Diego, *Chain World* was created in response to the conference challenge "Bigger Than Jesus: Games as Religion."[1]

Unlike most computer games, the details of game play in *Chain World* are intentionally vague, designed to be played by only one gamer at a time. As part of the ethos of the game, whoever is the current wielder of the USB device is as a god unto the virtual world within. Gamers are to speak to no one about the efforts of their own godhood created in *Chain World*, but are encouraged to leave monuments or artifacts for future gamers to ponder. Such a "virtual footprint" creates in essence a digital environment of a pilgrim's journey. Addressing the Game Developers Conference, Roher, a self-identified atheist, informs the crowd, "We become like gods to those who come after us."[2]

What Roher did not figure into his effort to build a digital world bigger than Jesus was the specter of holy war. As the first gamer to wield *Chain World* after its creator, Jia Ji embraced his pulpit like a televangelist. Within a week of inheriting the USB drive, Ji

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[1] Jason Fagone, "Bigger Than Jesus," *Wired*, August 2011, 97.

[2] Ibid., 100.

put it up for auction on Ebay, offering virtual godhood to the highest bidder. Ji defended his actions, stating, "You're the god of *Chain World*, you can set edicts."[3] Such irreverent application of one's power, however, is disapproved of within the gaming community, many calling for the immediate "excommunication" of Ji and his winning bidder. After witnessing a number of his "nine commandments of *Chain World*" broken within the first generation, Roher responded like a modern-day Jesus addressing the money-changers: "Im in ur temple flippin ur tables," he tweeted Ji.[4] As many religions before it, eventually *Chain World* became more burden than sacrament, the prospect of governing one's own creation far less appealing from the highest vantage point. Still, many gamers may regard the brief life of *Chain World*, as in the observation of game theorist Ian Bogost, "both horrifying and beautiful."[5]

Chain World stands as a curious indicator of the increasing interface of established religion and digital technologies. Old world concepts of revelation and ritual are being reengineered in the global explosion of the digital revolution, affecting communication, behavior, knowledge, and the discernment of knowledge. Such far-reaching societal influence on behalf of technological advances has deep religious implications. For millennia, religion narrated the dialog of purpose, ethics, and destiny; yet with the domination of social media and digital tools, how society knows and practices these lofty ideals is taking radically different shape. The very language of

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[3] Jason Fagone, "Bigger Than Jesus," 103.

[4] Ibid., 104.

[5] Ibid.

knowledge and ascertaining truth is shifting, as the ubiquitous verb "googling," meaning to seek information through an online outlet, reveals.

Christianity makes bold claims of and within the world. Claims of knowing God and knowing that God wants to be known stand as the bedrock of Christian understanding. Such understanding is contingent upon a thorough application of authoritative revelation and a regard for Scripture as the source of such authority. However, in the new environment of fluid knowledge claims, collaborative truth-discovery, and relevance-based search results, the place traditionally occupied by Scripture both in the Church and in the world, may be marginalized. Twenty-first-century Christianity faces the prospect of the *Chain World* effect in which rules and revelation passed down to the next generation become re-appropriated or simply made irrelevant. To move beyond the twentieth-century liberal-conservative debates, the evangelical church must enter a more timely reflection of God's Word that speaks to the unique and emerging climate of the twenty-first century. Failing to do so may result in, as the words of New Testament scholar Telford Work warn, a failure to "name the Bible's character and work in [our] churches, let alone the Church at large and the wider world."[6]

The following pages offer an exploration into the place of biblical authority in both the Church and the wider world of digital media. The hypothesis put forward is that an understanding of the changing climate of epistemology and revelation, as led by the influence of new media and digital democracy, requires the evangelical church to pioneer

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[6] Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 6.

new approaches of framing biblical revelation and authority in order to advance the gospel and engage in healthy mission in the twenty-first century.

As society continues to wrestle with the implications of the Information Age, the Church must understand how these societal shifts are impacting its mission. New media and the digital democracy represent more than technological innovation, they are in significant ways revolutionary. Nonetheless, revolutions do not progress from point A to point B, but rather in the words of technology authority Clay Shirky "go from A through a long period of chaos, and only then reach B. In that chaotic period the old systems get broken down long before new ones become stable."[7] The present era is the shifting environment Shirky describes in which old structures and systems are breaking down. For those in the Church, the chaos emerges in the form of challenges to long-held conventions.

Among these challenges is the changing landscape of truth and authority. Digital media outlets exert an increasing influence over epistemological issues including how knowledge is sought and deciphered and how justified belief is distinguished from opinion. The global popularity of Wikipedia and Google demonstrates the growing acceptance of truth by consensus and relevance, respectively. This trend poses a challenge to the Church that has been given a mandate to proclaim and defend the authoritative Word of God. Whereas the post-Enlightenment Church combated skepticism and critical analysis directed at Scripture, the postmodern generation of Christian leaders finds its proclamation of the Bible and its claim to revealed knowledge

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[7] Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 68.

marginalized and dismissed as irrelevant and outdated. The digital generation favors less centralized authority structures, more democratic knowledge construction, and "what they seem to want more than anything else … is honesty, realism, and authenticity."[8] The Church's traditional framing of authority and truth is in danger of missing the generative ethos of our time.

In recent years, Christian leaders and congregations have sought to understand what effective ministry to postmoderns looks like. As I began my own career in pastoral ministry in the mid-nineties, churches were developing ministries targeted to young adults in what became popularly known as "GenX" services. This marked a partial response to what church leaders understood as the changing postmodern culture. Embraced among many young adults was an emphasis on the authentic and the experiential. The showy, high-production worship services of the baby boomers were largely rejected by the younger generation of worshipers, and "postmodern ministry" soon became a buzzword for a different kind of Sunday experience. Still, by the early years of this century, many GenXers recognized that duplicating the attractional worship service, albeit with different trappings, failed to address the core issues.[9] Postmoderns were exploring a renewed sense of obligation to their community and a desire to participate in social justice causes both locally and around the world. The response from the evangelical church was the missional dialog of the last ten years. Churches looked outward, not in evangelistic programs, but in incarnational expressions of the Kingdom. As fruitful as these responses to culture change continue to be, there are elements of the

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[8] Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller, eds. *Gex X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6.

[9] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 18.

postmodern dialog still ripe for serious reflection among evangelical congregations. These include the emphasis on story and experience in hermeneutics, the role of community and collaboration in epistemology, and the ramifications these concepts have on bibliology.

This paper will offer an examination of these considerations and the challenge posed to the Church and will consist of three parts. The first part concerns the specific ministry challenge. Epistemological foundations for truth and knowledge constructs and the influence of digital and social media outlets will be explored. Additionally, the ministry context of Silicon Valley, as the hub of digital innovation and cultural change, will be discussed. The second part will offer a theological reflection of biblical authority and the Church's appeal to revealed truth. This will include a reflection of historic bibliology, considering historical and contemporary teaching on the identity and role of Scripture. In the third part, a strategy for ministry will be put forward in an effort to provide a theologically and culturally robust roadmap for Christian leaders to reframe biblical dialog within the environment of digital natives, recognizing the influence of new media, while maintaining the absolute and singular voice of God.

PART ONE

MINISTRY CHALLENGE

CHAPTER 1

THE RISE OF DIGITAL CULTURE:
EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND SILICON VALLEY ENVIRONMENT

It is the greatest truth of our age: Information is not knowledge.
—Caleb Carr, *Killing Time*

Writing in 1973 in his landmark work, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*,

Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell predicted:

> A post-industrial society is based on services. Hence, it is a game between persons. What counts is not raw muscle power, or energy, but information. The central person is the professional, for he is equipped, by his education and training, to provide the kinds of skill which are increasingly demanded in the post-industrial society. If an industrial society is defined by the quantity of goods as marking a standard of living, the post-industrial society is defined by the quality of life as measured by the services and amenities—health, education, recreation, and the arts—which are now deemed desirable and possible for everyone.[1]

With impressive accuracy, Bell anticipated that what would define the current climate of

the early twenty-first century is an interconnected life of services fed by a universally

accessible stream of information: what a society knows will shape its identity and

practice. This historical shift from industry to information as the driving societal

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[1] Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society; A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 127.

mechanism is broad and multifaceted, but a brief overview of key features will aid in understanding the influence of new media, and the challenge posed to the evangelical church. This chapter presents a philosophical and cultural assessment of the current information-driven environment. The first section offers an evaluation of key epistemological constructs that have shaped truth discovery, discernment, and proclamation. Additionally, as the hub of digital culture, this chapter explores the unique ministry context of Silicon Valley. With much of the product of this region influencing broader culture, an understanding of the history and values of Silicon Valley informs this present discussion.

The Environment of New Media and Digital Democracy

While Bell's predictions envisioned the change in the work force from blue collar to white collar, the real societal impact has been in the receiving end of the digital economy, the consumer. In the new media, the individual is both king and commodity. In another early forecast of the effect of digital media, MIT computer engineer Nicholas Negroponte foresaw the emergence of what he coined the "Daily Me," a virtual daily news stream customized to an individual's particular tastes.[2] Such personalized information typifies the climate of the present age. As the individual chooses the kind of stories and feeds, an implicit choice is made of what news (knowledge) is unacceptable, uninteresting, or simply unimportant. Despite such initial appeal, the Daily Me mentality can result in the "echo chamber" effect, defined by journalist David Weinberger as "those

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[2] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 25.

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Internet spaces where like-minded people listen only to those people who already agree with them."[3]

In addition to custom-made news feed, the Daily Me phenomenon also has resulted in unfettered access to consumers: Targeted ads show up in one's search results, shopping prompts may find their way to one's Facebook margin, consumer giants like Amazon and Half.com are able to offer goods to their customers with pinpoint accuracy based on their Internet browsing history and other factors. With such "behavioral targeting," knowledge is money as companies purchase accumulated data on potential consumers in order to streamline marketing and posture their goods most economically. While on the surface there is a level of convenience for the consumer, many denounce this as a surrender of privacy and an over-stepping of industry into private lives. As of March 2011, online marketing groups have agreed to a process of monitoring and regulation.[4] However, despite external regulation the trend toward increased overlap between private knowledge and public knowledge through one's individual online activity appears irreversible. Again, Bell speaks prophetically:

> In the post-industrial society where the relation among men… becomes the primary mode of interaction the clash of individual interests, each following its own whim, leads necessarily to a greater need for collective regulation and a greater degree of coercion (with a reduction of personal freedom).[5]

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[3] David Weinberger, "Is There an Echo In Here?," Salon.com, www.salon.com/2004/02/21/echo_chamber/ (accessed May 11, 2012).

[4] Edmund Lee, "How Behavioral Advertising Principles Will Be Enforced," Ad Age , http://adage.com/article/digital/behavioral-advertising-principles-enforced/149228/ (accessed June 26, 2012).

[5] Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, 475.

Another effect of the present digital environment exerts a broad influence on society in quite the opposite direction from the Daily Me influence. The concept of the "Tyranny of the Majority," first used among Enlightenment thinkers like Alexis de Tocqueville, offers an additional unique challenge to life in the digital revolution. The Tyranny of the Majority is understood as "the opinions of the majority within society [as] the basis of all rules of conduct within that society, so that on a particular issue people will align themselves either for or against this issue and the side of greatest volume prevails."[6] For example, trust indicators in Ebay and local reviews in Yelp provide scores indicating the degree to which a buyer/seller or establishment is favored by the majority. Italian media theorist Paolo Massa believes that such an application of a majority metric comes at a hidden cost. Massa states "the minority's opinions should be seen as an opportunity and as a point of discussion and not as 'wrong' or 'unfair' ratings as often they are modeled in simulations in research papers."[7]

The recent emergence of what has been labeled the digital democracy is what affords this minority a global conduit of expression. Though often used in reference to a specific public engagement of political issues, digital democracy can refer to society's broader engagement of social and public issues via online technologies.[8] Addressing the diplomatic implications of Internet-based public dialog, then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton proposed that digital democracy "allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate. Once you're on the Internet, you don't need to be a tycoon or a

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[6] Paolo Massa and Paolo Avesani, "Trust Metrics on Controversial Users: Balancing Between Tyranny of the Majority," *International Journal on Semantic Web and Information Systems,* 3 (2007), 18.

[7] Ibid., 18.

[8] Lev Grossman, "Power to the People," *Time Magazine*, December 25, 2006, 43.

rock star to have a huge impact on society."[9] Though not all technologies fan the flame of collaboration, "technologies that afford expressive capabilities, like radio, television, the Internet, and related media, tend to trigger narratives of emancipation, autonomy, and freedom in the public imagination."[10] As will be shown later in a discussion of Wikipedia's metric, the democratizing of information is not inherently good nor bad, but it is changing how society thinks. This tension between individual reflection and consensus, as well as between public and private knowledge, is an increasingly key task for the present generation to navigate. Understanding the history of this shift in the discernment of knowledge will guide the efforts of those with a mandate to proclaim an ancient Truth.

Epistemological Foundations of Information Age

Collection and discernment of the world's knowledge may be considered the defining concern of the Information Age. This paper posits that the present environment of information and truth discernment offers a pointed challenge to the Church's historic mandate to proclaim revealed knowledge. To understand the scope of the issue, it is necessary to consider the epistemological implications of the most recent knowledge and information constructs, and their influence on the identity and practice of the evangelical church. This will include brief overviews of the two most dominant constructs, scientific rationalism and postmodernism, followed by a consideration of the more recent paradigm of postfoundationalism.

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[9] Clinton, Hillary R. Clinton, "Remarks on Internet Freedom," U.S. Department of State, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm (accessed May 14, 2012).

[10] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 5.

Scientific Rationalism

Scientific rationalism, the intellectual offspring of the Enlightenment, actually had

its origins during the Renaissance. After centuries of religious wars and fiefdoms,

Europeans shifted their gaze inward. The Renaissance planted the seeds of what would

become the Enlightenment's preoccupation with self.[11] By the seventeenth century,

modernist thinking was prevalent, characterized by Decartes' widely used axiom, "I

think, therefore I am."[12] This became the basis of the fundamental Enlightenment

assertion that "the existence of the thinking self is the first truth that doubt cannot

deny."[13] With humanity at the center, modernity was free to engage the natural world

through observation and scientific method, driven by Newtonian science. The thinking

self and the mechanistic world provided a hard, objective lens through which to view the

ever-widening world.

Modernity's "absolute faith in human rational capabilities" created

epistemological assumptions of knowledge as attainable, objective, and morally good.[14]

This resulted in a detachment of the individual from a mechanistic environment, allowing

thought to be considered completely neutral. With knowledge divided into clearly

portioned categories, special status was given to those with expertise within their own

category. The university took the place of the chapel as the wellspring of knowledge and

revelation. Academics became the chaplains of rationalism, even adopting the robes and

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[11] Stanley J. Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing,1996), 2.

[12] Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method Part Four*, Writings I: 127.

[13] Grentz., 3.

[14] Ibid., 4.

gowns of the clergy. Furthermore, the Church did not resist this takeover as Christian leadership embraced the ethos of the time with emphasis on a professional class and the hierarchy of knowledge.[15] Scientific rationalism promised a certain inevitability of progress: given enough knowledge and expertise, modernity would be freed from political, economic, and social bonds in which it had been ensnared for centuries. Charles Darwin's widely embraced theory of evolution sparked adherence to the notion of mankind's ascent that went beyond biology and spilled into various disciplines. Like the Victorian era hero Sherlock Holmes, modernity triumphed through cold, calculating deduction, and the superiority of objective knowledge.

The foundational underpinnings of scientific rationalism charted the course for the last two centuries of evangelical hermeneutic and *kerygma*, or proclamation. Modernity's insistence on historical investigation and rational methodology resulted not only in increased skepticism in areas of biblical theology, but also produced volumes of keen insight and rigorous analysis of Scripture.[16] This broad utilization of higher criticism in Christian thought led to the two centuries-long divide between liberal and conservative Protestantism. With a growing concern that the Bible be shown as a reasonable, foundational source, conservative theologians placed increasing emphasis on biblical doctrines of authority and inerrancy. Theologian and philosopher Nancey Murphy suggests that such doctrines of theological conservatives emerged as a defensive reaction against modernist foundational thinking. This posture reasons that "if Scripture is to

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[15] Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 19.

[16] N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 82.

provide an indubitable foundation for theological construction, then all of its teachings

must be free from error, lest the theologian make erroneous judgments, in distinguishing

true teachings from false ones or essential teachings from incidental cultural

assumptions."[17]

Allowing modernity to frame theological dialog reached beyond the inerrancy

issue. In post-Enlightenment modernity, biblical discourse tended toward the liberal

affirming or conservative reacting to major thematic elements. Within historical inquiry,

the key issues of theology tended toward questions of the historicity of Jesus and his

words. Within scientific inquiry, the theological issues related largely to cosmology and

origins. New Testament scholar and historian N. T. Wright suggests "much biblical

scholarship … has been poised between the necessary and exciting task of historical

investigation, and the polemical use of rationalistic historiography as a deliberate

weapons against the claims of the Church."[18] Modernity thus framed the conversation,

forcing the movement to become known as fundamentalism to insist on clearly defined

and defended parameters of biblical authority.

Postmodernism

The moniker postmodernism has its roots in the 1930s as a broad term describing

the historical transition evident by the early twentieth century.[19] More acceptance of the

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[17] Nancey C. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 17.

[18] Wright, *The Last Word,* 85.

[19] Joseph P. Natoli, and Linda Hutcheon, *A Postmodern Reader* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 119.

label came in the 1970s as a description for an emerging architectural style.[20] Departing

from the boxy, functional approach of modern building design, postmodern design

employed ornament, openness, and contextual sensibility. Where the individual viewed

the modern structure objectively set apart from it, postmodern design strives to eradicate

the distinction between subject and object. An element cannot be understood apart from

its context and surrounding influences.[21] As a broad rejection of old "structures" began

to extend to the language of other disciplines such as literature and philosophy,

postmodernism was established as a far-reaching worldview and explanation of society's

increasing rejection of modernity.

Of these rejected structures, the ones under perhaps the greatest scrutiny were the

concepts of truth and knowledge. Postmodern thinking operates in a very different

epistemological vantage point than scientific rationalism. Where the latter affirms these

as an attainable moral good, the former embraces reductionism, relative thinking, and

socially constructed epistemologies. Regent College theologian Stanley Grentz identifies

the postmodern worldview: "Truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on

the community in which we participate."[22] Bell had predicted that this post-industrial,

postmodern age would be marked by "communal" society deciding what is true against

the sum total of individual decisions and analysis.[23] In fact, this evaluation of postmodern

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[20] Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 15.

[21] Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 23.

[22] Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism,* 8.

[23] Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, 275.

thinking becomes all the more radical when recognized that the very nature of truth itself is reduced to experience, and no absolute foundation of any claim can be known.

As western culture began to come to grips with this new frontier of postmodernism, our stories and cultural offerings reflected decidedly postmodern sensibilities. One of the unmistakable examples of this in film is Larry and Andy Wachowski's cyberpunk thriller, *The Matrix* (1999). Set in an alternate future of a machine-dominated dystopia, the humans battle to recover lost freedom and self-determination in a relentless oligarchy and technocracy. With a mixture of eastern and western spirituality, along with unrelenting violence and hostility, *The Matrix* presents the postmodern dilemma of determining truth from falsehood, reality from idealism. In the final scene, the hero Neo confronts his mechanistic nemesis in what could be viewed as postmodernism's brash challenge to modernity: "I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see … a world without you, a world without rules or controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible. Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you."[24] Such a provocation embodies the postmodern value of dismantling the broad narratives of history and knowledge with which modernity has become confident.

In considering the nature of the Church's mandate, postmodernism poses a unique challenge to evangelicalism. Charles Jencks, a prominent landscape architect and renowned postmodern thinker, relays the scope of this challenge: "Postmodernism means the end of a single world view and, by extension, a war on totality, [and] a resistance to

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[24] *The Matrix*, directed by Andy and Larry Wachowski (United States: Village Roadshow Pictures, 1999).

single explanations."[25] What Jencks advocates is a multi-layered, highly subjective

worldview in which context and point of view takes a dominant role to proposition and

convention. By contrast, Christianity is largely considered a unified worldview whose

central expression and narrative is found in the identity and claims of the person of Jesus.

Modern evangelicalism, as a loosely bound movement of gospel-centered Protestant

churches and Christians, identifies deeply with this narrative. With roots in the

Reformation, revivalism, and early twentieth-century fundamentalism, evangelicalism is

historically connected to modernity. The politics, ecclesiology, academics, and media of

evangelicalism within the modern experiment have shaped its culture. Its systematic

theology seeks to order Christian thinking around rational biblical expression.

Evangelical apologetics has historically operated in the modernist environment of truth

and knowledge with recent generations of apologists recognizing the need to address the

postmodern framework of thinking and truth discovery.[26]

The postmodern challenge in effect undermines conventional epistemologies of

Christian revelation, reducing truth to flexible notions of experience. As postmodern

philosopher Michel Foucault describes it, truth is nothing more than "a system of ordered

procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of

statements."[27] The Church, therefore, becomes just another institution maintaining power

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[25] Natoli, and Hutcheon, *A Postmodern Reader*, 111.

[26] Nancy Pearcy notes Francis Schaeffer as one of the first evangelical apologists to successfully engage the postmodern critic, both utilizing postmodern language, while at the same time challenging postmodern assumptions. See Nancy Pearcy, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 244-245.

[27] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 133.

through the repeated dissemination of its narrative. Such rhetoric marginalizes classic epistemologies the Church has historically used to practice its directive in the world, submerging the rock of Christ's Church into the abject fluidity of postmodernism.

Postfoundationalism

As the evangelical church begins to find it footing in the twenty-first century, it wrestles with the tension inherent in the models described above. Scientific rationalism combats the claims of Scripture on the basis of historical, scientific, and ethical grounds. Postmodernism largely rejects all forms of foundational and concrete epistemologies. Within evangelicalism, one finds champions of both models: those who advocate rigorous rational study of Scripture with knowledge as the greatest goal, and those who adopt a principally contextualized and community-driven hermeneutic. Caught in the middle is a Church striving to overcome the impasse between these foundationalist and nonfoundationalist models in order to effectively proclaim the Word of God to broken communities. The task ahead for the Christian teacher is discerning the changing epistemological influences and practices of our society, while maintaining high regard for the living and active voice of God through Scripture. While much of the "postmodern ministry" conversation of the past decade has successfully challenged and shaped the Church's view of worship, missions, and outreach, there remains a critical dialog largely missing with regard to revelation, *kerygma*, and discipleship.

Recent philosophical-theological inquiry has provided something of a third way of navigating these epistemological challenges. Postfoundationalism offers a methodological framework for approaching key elements of rationality, truth, and

knowledge in the midst of society's changing sensibilities. While embracing some

offerings of modernity, the postfoundationalist seeks to find rational bedrock through

interdisciplinary conversation, yet concurrently recognizes that rational reflection will

necessarily be conditioned by contextual and localized influences, as postmodernism

insists.[28]

In contrast to nonfoundationalists, who reject any established foundations of

belief systems, postfoundationalism seeks to make two key assertions in theological

inquiry: First, it affirms the critical role of "interpreted experience, and the way tradition

shapes the epistemic and nonepistemic values that inform our reflection about God."[29]

Second, a postfoundational metric looks to a point beyond the confines of context or

culture, and toward "a plausible form of interdisciplinary conversation."[30] This verifies

the existence of common (i.e., foundational) human rationality in epistemological pursuit,

while encouraging varied manners of reflection within traditions and experience. While,

like all constructs, postfoundationalism suffers from cracks and obstacles, for the

purposes of this paper it offers a vantage point for robust dialog about the changing

nature of every day epistemologies. The challenge to those who would uphold the

authority of Scripture, as described by British theologian Anthony Thiselton, is to bracket

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[28] Ed. J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen, "Postfoundationalism," *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, Vol. 2. Gale Cengage, 2003. eNotes.com, http://www.enotes.com/postfoundationalism-reference/ (accessed July 11, 2012).

[29] J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 4.

[30] Ibid.

the horizon of the biblical narrative's ancient context with the horizon of our present experience.[31]

The Ministry Context of Silicon Valley

In addition to the epistemological landscape of the digital age, the present ministry context is also informed by cultural factors. The following section provides a history and cultural overview of the hub of digital development, Silicon Valley. Leland Stanford, railroad baron of the Gilded Age, saw the opportunity that lay ahead for the West Coast approaching the turn of the century. His Central Pacific Railroad had already connected the nation in a way previously unimagined, but Stanford understood increased connectivity was to extend beyond the rail. To honor their beloved sixteen-year-old son who had passed away from typhoid fever, Stanford and his wife established Leland Stanford Junior University in 1891, with a first class of over five hundred students and fifteen original faculty members.[32] The vision for Stanford University was to be an institution that embraced the surrounding community and industry, making the relationship between business and education "seamless, and in many respects, singular."[33] Such an institution would be marked as a wholly different enterprise than its Ivy League equivalents on the East Coast.

Leland Stanford's vision has been repeatedly validated as Stanford University continues a tradition of partnership with the business community, as well as patronage of

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[31] Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Glasgow, UK: Harper Collins, 1992), 3.

[32] Deborah Perry Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley: What Everyone Else Can Learn from the Innovation Capital of the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 54.

[33] Ibid.

commercial—and particularly technological—enterprise. In the 1950s, Stanford Dean of Engineering Frederick Terman founded what would become the Stanford Research Park, a sprawling seven hundred acres of business and research facilities that has attracted and helped launch some of the most successful technology companies in the world.[34] Companies whose technologies or business plan originated in Stanford classrooms or research labs include Cisco Systems, eBay, E*Trade, Google, Hewlett-Packard, Netflix, and Sun Microsystems to offer a partial list.[35] This unique gathering of technology, business, innovation, and academics became the hub of what would be known as Silicon Valley. A general description for the peninsula region between San Francisco and San Jose, Silicon Valley is synonymous with technologically-driven advancement in business and in culture. Products, services, and processes that are developed here shape how communities live, learn, and do business in the future.

Having moved to the Bay Area from Washington, DC, former lobbyist Deborah Perry Piscione found Silicon Valley business culture to be a "a culture of mavericks … more interested in moving the needle forward than following the path of tradition."[36] Silicon Valley enterprise and technology shapes the larger world outside, and understanding this non-traditional culture of mavericks is a unique opportunity afforded to Bay Area Christian leaders and churches who seek to frame biblical truth and

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[34]Stanford University,"Stanford Research Park," Stanford University Real Estate, http://lbre.stanford.edu/realestate/research_park (accessed May 30, 2013).

[35] Stanford University, "Wellspring of Innovation," Stanford University Corporate Guide, http://www.stanford.edu/group/wellspring (accessed October 3, 2013).

[36] Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, 10.

discovery in meaningful and healthy ways. To understand effective ministry in the

Silicon Valley context, two key cultural values will be examined.

Innovation

Silicon Valley invites an environment of innovation. The imprint of one recent

world-shaping innovator, Elon Musk, speaks to the creative wealth of this region. Born

and raised in South Africa, Musk moved to California to begin a doctoral program in

physics at Stanford University, yet attended classes for only two days before deciding on

another direction.[37] Musk, a design and engineering prodigy, was determined to make an

imprint in the world in what he considered "important problems that would most affect

the future of humanity."[38] These problems, in Musk's estimation, included Internet

commerce, clean energy, and space exploration.[39] Before the age of forty, Musk had co-

founded PayPal, Tesla Motors, and had founded the space transport company SpaceX.

Because of these contributions, Musk is hailed as one of the leading innovators of this

generation.[40]

Innovation is distinctly different from invention. While invention concerns the

design and development of a previously non-existent device or product, innovation is the

process of bettering previously existent products or designs. Using Musk's three

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[37] Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, 78.

[38] Michael Belfiore, *Rocketeers: How a Visionary Band of Business Leaders, Engineers, and Pilots Is Boldly Privatizing Space* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2007), 166.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Musk was awarded the Innovator of the Year award in 2007 by *R&D* magazine. "Rocket Man," RDmag.com, http://www.rdmag.com/articles/2007/09/rocket-man (accessed May 30, 2013).

companies as an example, Internet commerce, electric cars, and space travel had each been around for some time before these companies. What Musk did was to identify inefficiencies or drawbacks in the present designs, offering an improved approach to each. However, innovation is more than mere improvement; while improvement seeks to do something better, innovation has the added component of doing something different.

Musk's contributions are just the more recent end of a long line of innovation that has marked Silicon Valley's history. Innovation as a cultural value creates a unique ethos to the community of Silicon Valley, manifesting in a number of secondary values: This region celebrates ideation, and the process of "brainstorming" or "whiteboarding" new thinking and development. Innovation fuels entrepreneurialism, and the value of investing in and committing to something new. Silicon Valley is unique in its high regard for failure: "In Silicon Valley, the fact that your enterprise has failed is actually a badge of honor," according to Shikhar Ghosh, a senior lecturer at Harvard Business School.[41] Finally, innovation fosters an environment for risk-taking and upsetting the status quo in such a way that marks a radically different approach to, say, Madison Avenue marketing, Washington politics, and Detroit manufacturing.[42]

Collaboration

As a second key value of Silicon Valley culture, collaboration is likewise not unique to the region, but it does represent a quality that has marked the area since its origins. Soon after arriving in Silicon Valley, Piscione noted the abrupt change in

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[41] Carmen Nobel, "Why Companies Fail, and How Their Founders Can Bounce Back," Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6591.html (accessed May 30, 2013).

[42] Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, 96.

environment early on: "Elements of competitiveness certainly emerge, but you can easily disengage yourself from that sort of tension, unlike the business climates of Washington or New York."[43] Stanford graduate Ben Lauing agrees, reflecting "competition is really a foreign concept to me … in my years at Stanford, not once did someone not help me or work with me when I asked."[44] Collaboration is not the absence of competition, but results from the intersection of meritocracy and drive—those with skills and passion tend to be drawn to one another.

As with innovation, collaboration seeds some related secondary values that are prevalent in the area. One such value is a high regard for flatter leadership structures, and a "disdain for hierarchical communication models."[45] Business reporter Rick Spence, writing on the success of Silicon Valley start-ups, identifies the strength of this trend: "Today's increasingly complex business challenges, generated by continuing new waves of products, technologies and markets, ensure old solutions are no longer enough. Judgment, creativity and initiative now rank equally with experience, if not above it."[46] Flatter collaborative environments have become something of a caricature of Silicon Valley, as one thinks of workplaces like the "Googleplex," Google's unconventional headquarters. Nonetheless, work environments such as these, which may resemble modern college campuses more than multi-billion dollar corporations, are intended to encourage shared experience, passion, and community.

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[43] Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, 6.

[44] Quoted in Piscione *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, 58.

[45] Ibid., 6.

[46] Rick Spence, "It Pays to Flatten the Pyramid," Financial Post, http://business.financialpost.com/2011/06/06/it-pays-to-flatten-the-pyramid/ (accessed June 2, 2013).

In addition, an emphasis on collaborative processes has also resulted in what may be described as the "spin-off" culture of Silicon Valley "wherein parent organizations spawn new 'generations' of companies."[47] This was embraced early in the Valley's history when Robert Noyce, a pioneer in silicon chip technology, encouraged any engineer who left his company to "take 'Noyce' culture with them."[48] It was not just about the spreading of technology, it became about the insemination of a way of designing products, solving problems, and attracting investors. Once again, this does not diminish the very real presence of competition, but it fans the flame of embracing a movement, being part of something bigger than any one company.

Engaging with the Culture

In many respects, the culture described here may seem incongruous with typical evangelical culture. Indeed, not often are "innovation," "non-hierarchical structures," and "risk-taking venture" terms associated with evangelicals, yet recent years has seen a more prominent evangelical presence in Silicon Valley. According to *Christianity Today* executive editor Andy Crouch, "this is not the Bible Belt by a long stretch… but in the past decade the San Francisco Bay Area has seen a resurgence of vital churches."[49] How these churches and Christian leaders are connecting the Word of God and biblical truth to such a dynamic community may help the church frame healthy and effective approaches to teaching and discipleship for the digital generation. In the remainder of this chapter,

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[47] Piscione, *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, 43.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Andy Crouch, "Here's the to Misfits" *Christianity Today*, May 2013, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/may/heres-to-misfits.html (accessed June 6, 2013).

consideration will be given to the experiences and practices of a number of these local leaders.

Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, in the affluent suburb of Menlo Park, is one of Silicon Valley's largest and most influential congregations. Teaching pastor and leader of Sanctuary, a ministry of Menlo Park Presbyterian focused on college students and young professionals, Scott Scruggs identifies some of the challenges of connecting with the Silicon Valley crowd. In a digital landscape of instantly accessible information and the abundance of content, seekers are far more informed and discriminating. Scruggs suggests while in past generations the preacher may have been considered "the expert in every public discourse," that concept is quite rare today.[50] People have detailed information accessible at all times, rendering the church's traditional claims to revealed truth as less compelling. Scruggs sees this as a unique opportunity for the Christian teacher who, rather than combating the notion, "needs to have the humility to link arms with the experts who do know, who can speak into that.… There is a level of credibility that comes from admitting I need to rely on the knowledge and expertise of others."[51]

Peninsula Covenant Church in Redwood City has likewise been an influential and community-minded congregation in Silicon Valley. Senior pastor Gary Gaddini, when asked how he preaches differently from when he assumed this pulpit ten years ago, emphasizes the power of tension: "I'm more at ease leaving questions unanswered now, leaving some things unresolved."[52] Gaddini and Scruggs embrace a common theme

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[50] Scott Scruggs, interview with the author, Menlo Park, CA, July 9, 2012.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Gary Gaddini, interview with the author, Redwood City, CA, March 5, 2013.

emerging in Christian proclamation to postmoderns: an epistemology of discovery and dialog that does not rely solely on strict foundational and propositional claims. These evangelicals will be quick to explain this is not an abandonment of truth, but a recognition of a new framework for truth discernment. Dean Smith, of the Highway Community in Palo Alto, affirms this approach to foundational teaching within a postmodern context: "We believe there is something that is true, and timelessly so. Jesus is the way, truth, and life, and there are a lot of different ways to get to him."[53] Doug Stevens, executive director of The Leadership Connection, consults with Bay Area churches and Christian leaders, and has been an interim pastor for the last two years in the community of Sunnyvale. Stevens also recognizes a need for leaders to explore post-foundational leanings "as long as there remains an anchor in the Word and the community of the Word."[54]

In returning to a "community of the Word," today's evangelical teachers, striving to make sense of their digital landscape, share an affinity with their Reformation heritage. Scruggs believes Wikipedia "actually reflects theologically more of what the Reformers were talking about: every person can hear from the Holy Spirit, every person can interpret Scripture."[55] Identifying this continuity between Reformation theology and a community hermeneutic is crucial in order to preserve the singular authority of Scripture,

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[53] Dean Smith, interview with the author, Mountain View, CA, June 18, 2012.

[54] Doug Stevens, interview with the author, Sunnyvale, CA, September 25, 2012.

[55] Scruggs, interview.

and avoid what Wright warns against as "hermeneutical narcissism, taking one's pleasure with the text and letting the rest of the world go by unnoticed."[56]

Considering the shift in normative epistemological values driven by Silicon Valley technology, digital and social media provide a unique opportunity for those with such hermeneutical convictions. Scruggs has observed that those who sit under the teaching of one pastor/teacher often find their faith reaching a plateau. "There's an opportunity for new voices to enter into the conversation, for more collaboration on behalf of leaders," he suggests.[57] The Highway Community, which embraces a multi-sensory worship and teaching experience, finds the value of a multi-layered, collaborative approach to teaching. Smith, raised in the theologically conservative Grace Brethren tradition, suggests that while "the sermon is an important part, we really try to use other elements to arrive at truth. We feel this is certainly a reflection of the times we live in."[58]

Shortly after their launch in 2000, the Highway Community started Highway Media, an industry leader in the production of worship-related video.[59] While most of their products are short films intended to compliment elements in a worship gathering, in 2012 Highway Media produced their first feature-length film in partnership with The BioLogos Forum called *From the Dust*.[60] This documentary explores the scientific and biblical issues relating to origins, using a broad range of experts from various fields and

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[56] Wright, *The Last Word*, 99.

[57] Scruggs, interview.

[58] Smith, interview.

[59] Highway Media, "About Highway Media," http://www.highwaymedia.org/aboutus.aspx (accessed June 7, 2013).

[60] Highway Media, "From the Dust," http://www.highwaymedia.org/From-the-Dust-P1985.aspx (accessed June 6, 2013).

perspectives. *From the Dust* represents a reframed approach to handling particularly sensitive issues in biblical teaching. Smith, who served as executive producer for the film, asserts that the strength of the film comes from the broader hermeneutical approach. Citing his hermeneutical differences from Regent College biblical studies professor Iain Provan, who is featured in the film, Smith remarks, "[Provan] thinks that the genealogies in Genesis are just traveling music between sections; there's nothing literal about them, but his interpretations are exactly mine …, the lessons he derives from those stories are identical."[61] That two markedly different hermeneutical schools would come to the same conclusions points to a "self-leveling" of collaboration and consensus described earlier in what might be called the Wikipedia effect.

The present epistemological landscape of knowledge, authority, and discernment has been formed over centuries of influence from the philosophical frameworks as well as the cultural environment described above. New technologies and social phenomena have propelled our praxis of truth and authority in unforeseen directions. The triumph of web-based search, collaborative repositories of knowledge and experience, and the far reach of social media have significantly changed what is known about knowing, and such change provides a unique confrontation to the role and identity of Scripture. The effect and sway of these new media will be the consideration of the next chapter.

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[61] Smith, interview.

CHAPTER 2

INFORMATION VENDORS: THE ONLINE CHALLENGE TO KNOWLEDGE

Wikipedia is a victory of process over substance.
—Ethan Zuckerman, *The Atlantic*

When Google made an inconspicuous announcement on its corporate blog on

December 4, 2009, the Internet juggernaut with a track record of innovation once again

transformed what would become the norm for millions of online users. Without fanfare,

Google showcased its plan for the ultimate in personalized search: fifty-seven "signals"

or personalized indicators to inform the search engine of the user's identity, preferences,

and interests.[1] These signals include previous searches, what browser was used, where

the user is logged in, and previous online purchase history. Such personalized search is

what journalist and political activist Eli Pariser labels the "filter bubble," the reach of

technology beyond presenting the world, and extending into skewing one's perception of

the world.[2] The implications of the filter bubble and the broader impact of Google will be

considered below, but its quiet emergence into the normative practice of web users

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[1] Eli Pariser. *The Filter Bubble*: *How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 2.

[2] Ibid., 13.

demonstrates the immense power of not only Google, but the ever-increasing market of online information vendors.

What has become the commodity of information is no longer a one-sided interest on the part of those who stand to gain financially through the control and dissemination of information. In the new media, the user is not some unknowing party, innocently parting with one's personal data; on the contrary, new media users are consumers of information, they crave it and openly trade in it. Calvin College communication professor Quentin Schultze suggests the word "informationism" to describe the fascination and reverence with which the current media culture assigns information.[3] Schultze describes this trend toward non-discerning faith in information as believed to be "a route to social progress and personal happiness."[4] With parallels to religious dialog, informationism can be understood as valuing "the *is* over the *ought*, observation over intimacy, and measurement over meaning."[5] The cultural marker called the Information Age may have initially been a reference to the tools of knowledge and discovery which have accelerated content and distribution of knowledge, but the term may increasingly be identified, in the words of Christian social blogger Tim Challies, as "the lens through which we understand life, through which we understand ourselves."[6]

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[3] Quentin Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 21.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 143.

This chapter will explore key players in digital media's contribution to emerging trends to information and knowledge. These will include search giant Google, the collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia, and the microblog social media platform Twitter. Their various approaches to truth and authority will be explored and evaluated, and their contribution to the social construction of knowledge will be examined in light of traditional models of epistemology described in Chapter 1. Given the broad influence of these culture-changing media institutions, this chapter will end with an examination of the unique challenges each pose to the task of biblical interpretation and proclamation.

Relevance: How Google Changed Everything

In a 1996 article on the growing impact of the Internet, *Newsweek* reporter Steven Levy offered an early glimpse at the potential of search engines: "As the Net evolves, so will the engines. The search companies believe that seeking a certain musical phrase, or photograph, or even a movie scene will be just as easy as looking for a text string … systems [will] know your personal preferences so well you get what you want almost before you ask."[7] However, during the pre-Google era, the prospect of online information search was little more than a passive exercise; the web user initiated the search terms and combed through pages of what may or may not have been relevant results. While the engines could offer some measure of specificity, it was for the user to determine utility, accuracy, and relevance. The Google-led shift from passive search results to user-targeted search was a major one, changing not only the way search is approached, but contributing to an emerging landscape of epistemological evolution. An engineer for a Google

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[7] Steven Levy, "Search for Tomorrow," *Newsweek*, October 7, 1996, 52.

competitor acknowledges this transformation: "The shift from exploration and discovery to the Internet-based search of today was inconceivable. Now, we go online expecting everything we want to find will be there. That's a major shift."[8]

By all accounts, Google is the most influential and powerful utility on the Internet. "Google seems omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent," observes cultural historian and media scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan, "It also claims to be benevolent."[9] The company's preeminent qualities Vaidhyanathan identifies are reflected in Google's mission statement, "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."[10] The benevolence Google claims is reflected in its unofficial motto offered from the earliest years of the company, "Don't be evil."[11]

One might think the tension inherent between the two goals of vending the world's information while maintaining an above reproach ethic would result in extreme caution on the part of the Google user. On the contrary, millions of people inherently trust the corporate giant with access to their most private information: personal calendars and detailed appointments, email correspondence, purchase history, financial data, private photographs, and search terms. Such trust is garnered from the "free" access to Google's products, with little appreciation on the user's part for the cost of the commoditization of information and knowledge. Google, after all, is a for-profit

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[8] Quoted in John Battelle, *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 61.

[9] Ibid., xi.

[10] Google Inc., "About Google," About Google, http://www.google.com/intl/en/about (accessed September 14, 2012).

[11] Chris J. Hoofnagle, "Beyond Google and Evil," First Monday, http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2326/2156 (accessed September 12, 2012).

company, and relies on consumer use and commerce for its revenue. In the opinion of Vaidhyanathan, such conflict of values may result in "a system that privileges consumption over exploration, shopping over learning, and distracting over disturbing."[12]

Search Engine: Knowledge Through Relevance

In the early days of web search, most search engines relied on the fairly simple mechanism of keyword retrieval. Not unlike the function every personal computer has for retrieving files from its own memory, keyword search scoured the Internet for pages that contained the words of the search parameters. What soon became frustrating for the online user were the irrelevant results contained within the overwhelming search return: users had pages of results, the great majority of which had no bearing on their search. By 1997, Google designers Sergey Brin and Larry Page recognized that for a search to be useful, it had to be relevant above all else: "We want our notion of 'relevant' to only include the very best documents since there may be tens of thousands of slightly relevant documents."[13] Determining relevance was the task of the search algorithm Page designed, that he called, with a certain degree of engineer's hubris, "PageRank."[14] PageRank was borne out of the culture of academia: "At Stanford, Page had seen professors count how many times their papers had been cited as a rough index of how important they were … he realized the [web] pages other pages cite could be assumed to be more 'important'."[15]

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[12] Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything*, 12.

[13] Brin and Page, "The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine."

[14] Pariser, *Filter Bubble,* 30.

[15] Ibid., 31.

With equal parts digital democracy and popularity contest, the search engine that would change how the world accesses knowledge had arrived.

According to Google, the actual code that drives their engine undergoes "hundreds of changes … in a given year."[16]   However, it is the democratic effect of the PageRank algorithm that determines much of the search results. Because of Google's reach, searches are performed in sample sizes measured in millions, not thousands, of links. "Eventually it's the people's choice that dictates the top results, we give people what they want," offers a Google search engineer.[17] This process also minimizes falsely inflated hits from "spammers," less reputable sites that use imbedded programs to actively promote their site or product. What Google's engine is unable to ensure, outside of direct involvement from a non-mathematical process, is distinguishing between truth and relevance of a search result. For example, if the satirical news site, The Onion, posts a clearly tongue-in-cheek headline, and enough other pages link to it, the false story may show up in numerous search results as a high-ranking result. The story will be "relevant" while not being true. Thus, Google's mission to make the world's information universally "accessible" appears well within the reach of their ever-improving mechanism, but making it universally "useful" may yet elude the Internet juggernaut.

Implications

Since Google's ascent over the last decade, much of the conversation about the cultural influence and societal implications of the company have focused on the issue of

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[16] "Facts about Google and Competition," How Google Search Works, http://www.google.com/competition/howgooglesearchworks.html (accessed September 13, 2012).

[17] David Peters, interview with the author, Mountain View, CA, Oct. 21, 2011.

privacy. Clearly, this is a critical issue; were the government to declare that federal

agencies would have immediate access to its citizens' email correspondence, purchase

history, personal photographs, location at any given time, and other areas of privacy,

there would rightly be an uproar of protest. Still, Internet users freely and daily offer this

information to Google and other for-profit online entities. The real threat to privacy, in

the estimation of University of San Diego ethicist L.M. Hinman, "may come from

BigBrother.com instead of BigBrother.gov."[18]

However, a more subtle area of Google's impact comes from their significant

contribution to the social construction of knowledge. Google, and other popular search

engines, do not merely provide access to stored knowledge, they are playing an active

part in the "constitution of knowledge itself."[19] The "filter bubble" effect defined earlier

is one such contributor to this. As noted above, the filter bubble results when, using

dozens of various signals that relay specific information about the user, Google offers

uniquely targeted or filtered search results and link suggestions. Pariser, who coined the

term, notes how the filter bubble shapes our understanding of news and information.

Using the search results of two associates, one with left political leanings, and the other

right, Pariser describes the range of search results for the inquiry "Egypt" made in early

2011.[20] While both users were educated white American males living in New York, the

results were quite disparate. One user was given top search results relating to the political

crisis in Egypt, while the other had top results in travel opportunities and more benign

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[18] L. M. Hinman, *Web Search: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Amanda Spink and Michael T. Zimmer, (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2008), 72.

[19] Ibid., 67.

[20] Eli Pariser, "Beware Online Filter Bubbles," TED Talk, May 2011.

daily news.[21] In such case, the Google search mechanism does not broaden knowledge, it appears to limit it. Restricting diversity of opinion and dialog is not a new threat to knowledge and inquiry, however, as Pariser notes, this has always been the prerogative of the free thinker. The Google search user steps into a "filter bubble" unknowingly and without being able to see it.[22] This may affect one's further thinking about a given issue, "thereby shaping the further development of knowledge about that issue."[23]

A potential effect of the ubiquity of Google concerns the phenomenon of relevance apart from truth. As noted above, because of its search algorithms, Google may and does offer results that, while technically relevant to the user's search parameters, are not necessarily true; in other words, popularity is no guarantee of accuracy. If a patently untrue news story or image is linked to often enough, and therefore rises in PageRank rankings, the site will still be a top search result on the basis of its perceived "relevance." In one regard, this is not a new phenomenon; the advertising industry has leveraged perceived relevance over accuracy since its inception. However, a significant difference comes with regard to the active versus passive posture of the user; the search user arguably invites and expects a slightly skewed version of truth and accuracy. How this subtle notion of knowledge discernment will seep into broader thinking is still to be determined.

Despite its relatively brief history, Google holds enormous sway over our perception of truth and knowledge. While their mission statement offers a bold and

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Pariser, *Filer Bubble,* 10.

[23] Hinman, *Web Search*, 73.

benevolent promise, Google's involvement in truth discernment and authoritative sources has far-reaching consequences.

Consensus: Wikipedia and Communal Knowledge

Arguably, a more direct challenge to conventional epistemic issues comes from another giant in digital media, Wikipedia, the publicly edited online encyclopedia. Were Wikipedia simply an ever-growing repository of information with presently over four million articles on their English language site, they would indeed be an ambitious enterprise. However, what truly defines Wikipedia is captured in the mission statement from its main page: "The free encyclopedia that anyone can edit." In this section, the history and emergence of the online encyclopedia will be briefly considered, and Wikipedia's contribution to our changing concepts of knowledge and authority will be examined. Central to this contribution is the role of consensus and the decline of the expert class and conventional knowledge sources.

The oldest surviving encyclopedia-like work in Western literature is Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*. This first century multi-volume work contains the summation of ancient knowledge in areas including science, history, and medicine.[24] The word *encyclopedia* itself is a Greek composite word literally meaning "circle of learning" or is to be understood as "complete knowledge." Still, knowledge, while it may be assembled and collected, is never truly complete as Pliny himself recognizes in the prologue, "I, indeed, freely admit, that much may be added to my works; not only to this, but to all

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[24] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, Perseus Digital Library, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/ hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+toc, (accessed November 23, 2012).

which I have published."[25] It is this reality that makes the emergence of digital media all the more relevant.

Wikipedia emerged from its predecessor, Nupedia, an effort by Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales to develop an online collection of knowledge that was easily and regularly updated and expanded.[26] Nupedia was originally designed to have peer-reviewed articles by qualified expert contributors, essentially a digital version of a conventional encyclopedia. However, Wales found the expansion of articles slow, and in 2000 launched what was conceived as a supplement to Nupedia. This was designed to be a publicly updated project that utilized a "wiki," an editing tool developed in 1995 that allowed for quick and easy edits.[27] The word itself stems from the Hawaiian word, *wiki*, meaning quick or fast.[28] By 2001, Wikipedia was launched as a stand-alone enterprise, quickly surpassing Nupedia in both contributors and users.

<center>Wikipedia Culture: Collaboration and Consensus</center>

The rise of Wikipedia, and its distinction over the more conventional model of Nupedia, is found in the culture of community that it has fostered. Harvard law professor, Lawrence Lessig, calls Wikipedia a "different kind of community," a collaborative community which at its center "freely and voluntarily gives to the world a constant

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[25] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*.

[26] Wikimedia Foundation Inc., "Wikipedia: About" About Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About#Wikipedia_history (accessed October 21, 2012).

[27] Ibid.

[28] Jospeh Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia* (Cambridge: MA, The MIT Press, 2011), 5.

invitation to understand and correct."[29] With nearly 75,000 "active Wikipedians"

worldwide, Wikipedia is by far the most collaborative literary effort in humankind's

history.[30] Since its inception, many who assume that an encyclopedia "anyone can edit"

would produce an inferior product have questioned the accuracy of the site.[31] Wikipedia

co-founder and philosophy professor, Larry Sanger, rebuffs the early criticism: "Many

Wikipedia articles were surprisingly good. The real shock came with the realization that

Wikipedia's articles were not good in spite of its openness, but because of it."[32]

In 2005, the science journal *Nature* designed an exercise to find out if a

collaborative effort could produce reliable and authoritative information in an objective

way.[33] Commissioning a study of forty-two comparable scientific articles in Wikipedia

and *Encyclopedia Britannica*, a team of experts sought to determine the accuracy of each.

The findings reported that the average article in Wikipedia contains four inaccuracies,

while *Britannica* averaged three.[34] The advantage for Wikipedia, argue its contributors, is

found in the culture of "good faith" collaboration assumed by the community, as

envisioned by Sales. Such democratic good faith works through a "regenerative feeding

back of positive research results to improve the means by which researchers themselves

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[29] Jospeh Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, ix.

[30] Active wikipedians are defined as those who make five or more article contributions per month. "Wikipedia Statistics," http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/TablesWikipediansEditsGt5.htm (accessed October 28, 2012).

[31] Chris Taylor, "It's a Wiki, Wiki World" *Time Magazine*, May 29, 2005.

[32] Lawrence M. Sanger, "The Fate of Expertise After Wikipedia" *Episteme* 6, no. 1 (Sept 2009): 52-73.

[33] Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 7.

[34] Ibid. It was noted that the inaccuracies of the Wiki articles were often those of omission of facts rather than commission of inaccurate information.

can pursue their work."[35] In other words, the larger Wikipedia grows, the greater its ability grows to self-correct, and the greater self-leveling effect is observed.

Related to collaborative community is the notion of consensus. If collaboration is the open door for would-be contributors, consensus is the playbook for Wikipedia administrators, and is the preferred method of decision making in the organization.[36] If the community calls the accuracy or neutrality of an article into question, consensus is the means the administrators employ to determine the agreed course. By their own admission, the process can be time-consuming and frustrating; consensus favors the status-quo over abrupt change, and is susceptible to groupthink.[37] However, the merits of consensus are favored over its shortfalls, promoting community engagement, open dialog, and mutually beneficial solutions.

Wikipedia's Challenge to the Expert Class

One powerful result of the rise of the publically edited encyclopedia is Wikipedia's inherent challenge to knowledge authorities. Conventional outlets, such as journalism, academics, and reference works, have always relied on the expert class to verify and endorse their material. With the emergence of a democratic and universal reference enterprise like Wikipedia, the door of contribution went from extremely narrow to enormously wide. Inclusion in this community is based solely on contribution, whether through an original article, editing an existing work, adding to the page's discussion, or

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[35] Douglas C. Engelbart, "Augmenting Human Intellect" SRI Presentation 3578 to U.S. Air Force Office of Scientific Research, Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, CA.

[36] Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 110.

[37] Wikimedia Foundation Inc., "Wikipedia: Consensus," About Wikipedia Conduct Policies, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Consensus (accessed October 30, 2012).

correcting a typo. To contribute to the Wikipedia community, there is no verification of

qualification, no vetting process. According to the site, "anyone can put Wikipedia in the

palm of their hands, including you. All you need to do is simply edit an article."[38]

Such editorial practices create difficulty at the purely practical level. As co-

founder of Wikipedia, Larry Sanger served as chief architect of the site's operations, yet

two years after its public launch left the organization a vocal critic of the site, particularly

with regard to the credibility issue and the lack of expertise.[39] Sanger maintains that

despite creating a reference work of primarily layperson's contributions, Wikipedia still

relies on expert opinion and authority to achieve the credibility it has garnered.

Referencing the *Nature* study, Sanger suggests that even in the future, supposing

Wikipedia reaches a 99.8 percent accuracy rating, and thus proves to be superior to

Britannica, it is expert opinion alone that will determine such a victory: "Then, in at least

one sense, some experts—namely, the experts who participated in the study—must have

been granted positions of special authority."[40] Wikipedia does indeed have the "self-

leveling" and "self-healing" affect Wales envisioned, and yet its defenders must still

appeal to some authority outside of Wikipedia to assert its reliability, namely expert

certification. Lacking such authority, in Sanger's estimation, the site "faces either

epistemic circularity or total justificatory groundlessness."[41]

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[38] Wikimedia Foundation Inc., "Wikipedia:Wikipedians," About Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians (accessed December 5, 2012).

[39] Sanger, "The Fate of Expertise After Wikipedia," 56.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Sanger, "The Fate of Expertise After Wikipedia," 57.

Some defenders may dig in further, maintaining that Wikipedia (and one might assume the full array of digital and social media) is wholly exempt from authoritative opinion to establish credibility. This is specious frontier thinking often found in a new cultural landscape—if one writes a blog or a wiki article, and another believes it, then no authority is needed. Clay Shirky identifies this trend already happening in online journalism. For centuries, journalists were validated by nature of working for a publisher. Publishing has always been a costly enterprise, and therefore enjoyed an elite status. There existed "a professional class of truth-tellers" who were given a privileged platform and position of authority.[42] The question of what happens to this professional identification when literally anybody can publish on a global platform has become a timely one. What naturally follows from this trend is "if anyone can be a publisher, then anyone can be a journalist."[43] Sanger rejects this as an untenable prospect: "Wikipedia articles are unlikely to rise above a certain level of mediocrity because … certain types of editorial problems can only be fixed if the [verifiability] rules are enforced."[44] Thus Wikipedia's egalitarianism and constructivist leanings serve to hinder the success of the site rather than advance it.

Implications

There is much to be admired in Wikipedia's brief history regarding the cultural contributions of the online resource. With a fraction of the staff and budget of Internet giant Google, Wikipedia provides seemingly endless information available for free in

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[42] Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 71.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Sanger, "The Fate of Expertise After Wikipedia," 65.

dozens of languages. Possibly the most telling commentary on the impact of Wikipedia is the likelihood that the top ranking Google result for most common (and not so common) searches will often be the Wikipedia article on that topic.[45] More than Google, Wikipedia stands as a microcosm of digital media in the early twenty-first century: bottom-up, collaborative, and community-based. The Web 2.0 world of content contribution wields a great allure to the online user. Editing a Wikipedia article, whether for content or form, can be a satisfying exercise. Shirky refers to this as the "'Kilroy was here' pleasure of changing something in the world, just to see my imprint on it," a version of "informationism" that seeks to affirm the self in the midst of the bits.[46]

Such an underlying motivation becomes much more than a vanity exercise. The phenomenon of content contribution is a critical one for understanding the cultural shift happening through digital media, and particularly through Wikipedia. True to its purpose statement, Wikipedia is indeed a "free encyclopedia," and those implications alone are far-reaching. How one finds information, where one finds information, the diminishing role of libraries and printed reference materials, what is expected of students doing research—all of these are lingering issues. However, it is the second half of the purpose statement that contains such sweeping implications: "that anyone can edit." Wikipedia is heading toward a direction where it may be difficult to discern between contribution and credibility. As Google offers "truth" based on relevant search parameters, Wikipedia offers "truth" based on consensus and collaboration.

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[45] Challies, *The Next Story*, 168.

[46] Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 132.

At issue is not the truthfulness of information, that designation has always been

the responsibility of the reader or researcher. At issue is the source of information, and

how to determine its credibility. University of Memphis professor Deborah Tollefsen

characterizes the concern by stating that the pressing question for Wikipedia is not

whether the statements are true, but rather, "whose testimony it is. What is the source of

that testimony?"[47] The sidelining of expert testimony, and the fully egalitarian practice of

content contribution does mark a significant shift in how society discerns knowledge and

authority.

Despite these cautions, a collaborative community with a "constant invitation to

understand and correct" remains a compelling opportunity. The real implication for a

digital repository of knowledge anyone can edit may not necessarily be in the content, but

in the community. The Wikipedia project is "both the textual artifact and the community

producing it."[48] Later in this paper, consideration will be given to the role of the Word of

God in Christian community occupying a similar dual existence, but for now it is

worthwhile to acknowledge the shift toward community-based truth and authority among

the currently most popular digital tools.

Twitter and Truth in Real-Time

Among the new generation of digital media to wield global influence, Twitter is a

relative newcomer. Launched in 2006, the microblogging social media site has over five

hundred million registered users as of July 2012, "tweeting" messages of under 140

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[47] Deborah Perron Tollefsen, "Wikipedia and the Epistemology of Testimony," *Episteme* 6, no. 1 (Sept 2009): 8-24.

[48] Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 3.

characters to their followers at the rate of over one billion a month.[49] Behind these

staggering numbers are a wide collection of tweeters and followers. One 2009 study

identifies three different categories of Twitter users: friends, information sources, and

information seekers.[50] However, more recently the nature of Twitter is evolving, with

lines increasingly blurring between what would have been considered a verified

information source and a casual user. Twitter, existing in some niche between trivial

social network and valid information vendor, has become what some refer to as a "social

awareness stream" where anything from personal snapshots to globally significant stories

are shared and spread.[51] This section will examine the role of Twitter in real-time news

and information sharing, and the implications of this medium to broader culture.

The World in 140 Characters

Attempting to provide comprehensive analytics of Twitter output and content is

an ineffectual task—the microblogging site's growth can only be described as

"exponential" between the years 2007–2012.[52] However, sheer numbers are not the

central story. What makes Twitter a culture-changer is its ability to shape global events

from an intensely personal vantage point. If the strength of Wikipedia is its "Neutral

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[49] Ingrid Lunden, "Analyst: Twitter Passed 500M Users In June 2012, 140M Of Them In US; Jakarta 'Biggest Tweeting' City," TechCrunch, http://techcrunch.com/2012/07/30/analyst-twitter-passed-500m-users-in-june-2012-140m-of-them-in-us-jakarta-biggest-tweeting-city/ (accessed December 7, 2012).

[50] Courtenay Honeycut, "Beyond Microblogging: Conversation and Collaboration via Twitter," Proceedings of the 42nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, (2009).

[51] Mor Naaman, "Hip and Trendy: Characterizing Emerging Trends on Twitter," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 62 no. 5 (June 2011): 902-18.

[52] "Twitter Statistics Showing Exponential Growth (Infographic)," Strategy Plan One, http://strategyplanone.wordpress.com/2012/05/27/twitter-statistics-showing-exponential-growth-infographic/ (accessed December 12, 2012).

Point of View" editorial mandate, Twitter's strength comes from its radically subjective point of view, giving outsiders privileged insight heretofore unavailable.

Among the unrest and activism that eventually led to the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, social media, particularly Twitter, played a role in unseating the regime of Honsi Mubarak. As pro-democracy leaders and activists clashed with police, Egyptian bloggers were providing real-time information and commentary, alerting their local followers of the events. Alaa Abd El Fattah was a pro-democracy activist and blogger living in Cairo when he and his wife were arrested by local police.[53] Tweeting from the police vehicle and eventually the station, Alaa rallied support of other activists. Real-time tweets offered up-to-the-moment movements of police and activists; Twitter silence was interpreted to mean the individual had been detained. Experiences like this continued throughout the period leading to the overthrow of the government, with social media coordinating efforts, even among opposing groups of secular and religious charters. For the first time, social media provided a direct link to social revolution, taking the tool of propaganda from the power structures and giving it to the people. As the *Wall Street Journal* expressed, "for authoritarian leaders used to controlling media and events, time and technology are not on their side."[54]

As Wikipedia invites anyone to become a published expert, Twitter allows anyone to be a pundit or propagandist. Social media, it is generally agreed, did not secure the 2012 election for Barack Obama, nor is to blame for Mitt Romney's loss, but it played a

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[53] Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 184-85.

[54] L. Gordon Crovitz, "Egypt's Revolution by Social Media." *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 14, 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703786804576137980252177072.html (accessed December 4, 2012).

role in crafting perception and narrative that shaped the public's view of the candidates far beyond what any debate or campaign commercial could accomplish.[55] Even beyond perception, trending Twitter topics fueled the news cycle; social media was generating momentum behind the stories, and journalists were taking their cues from the public, turning conventional journalism upside-down.

Generating trending topics on Twitter is accomplished through employing the hashtag (#) in one's tweet, and is itself a noteworthy contribution to the present discussion. Fittingly, this device came out of the Twitter community of users, and not from the original designers. By linking a hashtag to a key word, phrase, or topic, this creates something of a trigger that alerts the "twitterverse," allowing a particular topic to be identified, tracked, and grouped to reflect what discussions are popular at any given time. While other media platforms use tagging practices, Twitter users appear to tag or re-tag in order to join a conversation on a global scale. University of Washington Information School researchers argue, "it is overwhelmingly likely that they might never have written the tweet if they had not been inspired to participate in the micro-meme phenomenon."[56] Once again, a digital media expression blurs the line between legitimate knowledge source and the self-promoting "Kilroy" phenomenon discussed above.

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[55] Colin Delany, "What Actually Mattered in Digital Media this Cycle," *Campaign and Elections Magazine*, Dec. 7, 2012, http://www.campaignsandelections.com/magazine/us-edition/344687/what-actually-mattered-in-digital-media-this-cycle.thtml (accessed December 12, 2012).

[56] Jeff Huang, Katherine M. Thornton, and Efthimis N. Efthimiadis, "Conversational Tagging in Twitter," University of Washington Information School, Seattle, WA, January 2010.

Implications

In 2010, comedian and writer Harris Wittels began re-tweeting celebrity tweets with a common theme: each message was a feigned attempt at modesty through the ever-present lens of public image. For example, renowned actress Ashley Judd seeks to garner sympathy for her troubles as she tweets from an awards ceremony: "Ugh. My category is up next. Hurry up and get this over with!!!!!"[57] Wittels eventually branded this unique clashing of interests as "Humblebrag" —tweets of questionable humility from the rich and famous—which has grown into its own popular Twitter feed, newspaper column, and book.

The "Humblebrag" phenomenon, however, is merely an exaggerated glimpse into the broader world of Twitter and social media. In the real-time world of global microblogging, Marshall McLuhan's famous axiom, "The medium is the message," is just as true as it was a generation ago, the difference being the "medium" is the user itself. The carefully crafted brand of the individual, his or her thoughts, movements, and outrages, become both medium and message. Social media and branding authority, Gareth Price, recognizes that "the potential to document our lives online means that a status update on Facebook, Tweet or Instagrammed photo doesn't just become a record or reflection of our behavior but a direct cause of it."[58] Price argues that decisions of what one thinks makes one appear knowledgeable, cultured, or interesting are made *a priori* based on how the subsequent event or actions will play out in social media. While the

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[57] Ashley Judd, Twitter post, September 23, 2012, 7:26 p.m., http://twitter.com/ashleyjudd (accessed June 17, 2013).

[58] Gareth Price, "The Imperceptible Impact of Social Media on our Everyday Lives," Discoverage, http://precisebrandinsight.wordpress.com/2012/11/28/the-imperceptible-impact-of-social-media-on-our-everyday-lives/ (accessed January 9, 2013).

result may have trivial meaning or global importance, such as with the Egyptian

Revolution, the source remains this inherent need to express, participate, and be heard.

One Stanford University study concludes that the use of Twitter to establish influence

and garner popularity "is not gained spontaneously or accidentally, but through concerted

effort. In order to gain and maintain influence, users need to keep great personal

involvement."[59] Such effort results in the rise of the brand over the message, as the

medium itself shapes experience.

Digital Media and Biblical Proclamation

In 2011, Christian author Rob Bell released a book, *Love Wins*, which addressed

the nature of hell and the issue of personal eschatology and judgment. Over a month

before the book's release, and having only read sample chapters, renowned author and

Bethlehem Baptist Church pastor John Piper tweeted: "Farewell Rob Bell."[60] In the

aftermath that followed, "Rob Bell" became a top ten trending topic on Twitter, and

Piper's original tweet was re-tweeted countless times.[61] Commenting on the social media

fallout from *Love Wins*, Collin Hansen, editorial director for the Gospel Coalition, stated,

"I've never seen anything like this. The traffic explosion testifies to the power of blogs

for hosting theological debate today."[62]

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[59] Meeyoung Cha, Hamed Haddadi, Fabrício Benevenuto, and Krishna P. Gummadi, "Measuring User Influence in Twitter: The Million Follower Fallacy," Proceedings of International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, Washington D.C., May 2010.

[60] Sarah Bailey, "Rob Bell's Upcoming Book on Heaven & Hell Stirs Blog, Twitter Backlash on Universalism," Christianity Today Blog: Gleanings, Feb. 26, 2011, blog.christianitytoday.com/ ctliveblog/archives/2011/02/rob_bells_book.html (accessed July 13, 2011).

[61] Twitter only indicates "100+", but the traffic suggests it was reposted thousands of times.

[62] Sarah Bailey, "Rob Bell's Upcoming Book on Heaven & Hell Stirs Blog."

Christians have been discussing judgment and personal salvation for two thousand years, but this example underscores the shift from passive information gathering to active interaction that is being fueled by our digital culture. As is the case with many new technologies, the information vendors described not only provide convenient tools for daily living, but they exert a cultural influence; navigating, as well as setting a course. The culture shift propelled by media outlets like Google, Wikipedia, and Twitter, creates unique challenges for the culture of biblical learning and proclamation. Some of these challenges will now be briefly examined.

As noted above, the contribution of Google to the evolving nature of epistemic issues centers around the notion of relevance. Use of Google promotes inquiry that favors utility over all else—search results are "true" because they are deemed relevant. On the surface, this is a sharp contrast to the notion of biblical proclamation. Jeremiah warns his generation of Israelites not to be swayed by the comfortable words of false prophets:

> How can you say, 'We are wise,
>   and the law of the Lord is with us'?
> But behold, the lying pen of the scribes
>   has made it into a lie…
> From prophet to priest,
>   everyone deals falsely.
> They have healed the wound of my people lightly,
>   saying, 'Peace, peace,'
>   when there is no peace (Jer 8:8-11).[63]

The warning being that those who deal in truthful utterance (scribe, prophet, and priest) may temper their proclamation with what is useful, comfortable, or expedient for the hearer.

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[63] All Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

While Google culture presents a system that privileges "consumption over exploration," a study in the *Washington Post* found that 64 percent of Internet search users indicate they use the web for "religious or spiritual" purposes.[64] Google has become a key conduit for spiritual inquiry, echoing the observation of the Google engineer noted above, "we give the people what they want." Individualized inquiry, filtered search results, and potentially unlimited findings create an overlap of variables one may consider unhealthy for the biblical learner seeking God's truth.

Wikipedia pushes the notion of truth-seeking even farther, into the place of knowledge construction. Clearly, this contains compelling ramifications for the biblical learner. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes the digital generation as "spiritual tinkerers" and suggests the emerging generation of Christians and spiritual seekers will practice a form of spirituality that requires connection, give and take, and collaborative dialog.[65] Wikipedia's contribution to "spiritual tinkering" is found in its culture of collaboration, and its challenge to the expert class. Contrasted to conventional models of western, evangelical Christianity, Wikipedia functions through community hermeneutic and regular invitation for correction. Throughout the church, the current paradigm for knowledge and learning is generally expert-based and hierarchical. Challies advises that if digital technologies like Wikipedia reduce the authority of an expert (e.g., theologian), and elevate the authority of an amateur (e.g., layperson), "how long before we undermine

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[64] Carol Eisenberg, "America's Old-time Religious Revival: More People Reaching Out for Spiritual Guidance," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2004.

[65] Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 135.

authority in other areas of life?"[66] The full ramifications of this challenge will be taken up

later, but it is legitimate to surmise that the impulse behind the concept of "the free

encyclopedia that anyone can edit" will eventually extend to Church culture.

Of the three giants of information vending examined here, Twitter remains the

most intimate. A glimpse of the Twitter lexicon reveals language that strives to be

relational and personal; the user seeks "followers" and yet "blocks" others from

following, there is a "discover" tab to find trending tweets and new users to follow, one

can send and accept "direct messages" that are kept private.[67] Engagement with Twitter is

not only personal, but holistic in that it intersects with nearly every facet of some users'

lives and relationships. For the last two years, use of Twitter itself has ranked in the top

spot of items or activities given up for Lent.[68] The enormous growth and individual

devotion of Twitter reveal two human desires that are also starkly intimate as well as

deeply spiritual: the need to belong and the need to be heard.

Microblogging creates a global community that, while may be considered

superficial, affords a measure of significance to its users. One's thoughts, actions, and

opinions are uploaded, shared, re-tweeted among a community. Twitter creates witnesses

to one's life, and validation of one's contribution. In essence, Twitter meets needs that for

prior generations had been met in spiritual community: the receiving of messages, the

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[66] Challies, *The Next Story*, 172.

[67] Twitter Inc., "The Twitter Glossary," Twitter Help Center,
https://support.twitter.com/articles/166337-the-twitter-glossary# Dec. 15 (accessed December 15, 2012).

[68] Stephen Smith, "What People Gave Up For Lent 2012 (According to Twitter)," Christianity
Today Blog: Gleanings , Feb. 27, 2012, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/
2012/02/what_people_gav_1.html (accessed December 15, 2012).

sharing of thoughts and responses to said message, a community of like-thinkers, a sense

of following and being followed. This is not perfectly analogous, but the overlapping of

basic human and spiritual need is there.

However, Twitter falls short in one key regard: Spiritual seekers have never found

validation or significance from other broken individuals; there remains always a place for

God to affirm belonging and individuality. *Leadership Journal* editor Skye Jethani, in a

2009 blog entry titled, "Why I Don't Tweet…" shares this conviction: "We all want our

lives to matter, and we believe they only matter if they are noticed by someone. I wonder

if this desire for a witness isn't what fuels Twitter. We want someone, anyone, to take

notice…to care about us…to watch us."[69] This spiritual hunger can only be deepened, but

never satisfied online. The need to belong and the need to be heard can only be met in the

One who calls us and knows us:

> O Lord, you have searched me
> and you know me.
> You know when I sit and when I rise;
> you perceive my thoughts from afar.
> You discern my going out and my lying down;
> you are familiar with all my ways.
> Before a word is on my tongue
> you know it completely, O Lord (Ps 139:1-4).

The rise of these and other online repositories stands as a remarkable statement of

life in the early years of the twenty-first century. While they share inherent problems,

they are a reminder of the relentless drive to know and be known. Perhaps beyond the

scope of prior tools, they are shaping how thinking and discernment is practiced. For a

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[69] Skye Jethani, "Why I Don't Tweet…" SkyeBox Blog, http://www.skyejethani.com/why-i-don%E2%80%99t-tweet%E2%80%A6/420/ (accessed December 15, 2012).

Church with a mandate to share truth through authoritative channels, there is a tension that comes from the changes brought on by these technologies, and yet beneath the surface, the opportunity for the Church is laid bare. The digital generation is seeking and searching, but they are uploaders and collaborators. They do not reject experts and authority out of hand, but they will not be excluded from the table of dialog and inquiry. Christian leaders have a responsibility to carry biblical thinking and God's voice into this dialog, preserving something of the ancient, and framing it for the postmodern. Part Two of this paper will begin to explore the theological issues, beginning with an examination of truth, revelation, and authority in Christianity.

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

TRUTH AND REVELATION IN CHRISTIANITY

> If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: if you look for comfort you
> will not get either comfort or truth.
>
> —C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

In the documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So* (2007), director Daniel Karslake

uses the controversy of sexual orientation and Christian culture to question the traditional

authority ascribed to the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures. As one scene closes, a hand is

seen shutting a large bound Bible as the voiceover suggests that using biblical passages to

discuss such a contemporary issue is "inappropriate" since the archaic language of

Scripture has no context for understanding the issues of same-sex attraction.[1] The clear

message of the scene (as with the film in its entirety) is to convey conventional wisdom

about the Bible in the twenty-first century: a once regarded voice of authority for faith

and practice, the Bible now has no place at the table of prevailing authority. To believe

counter to this is to be a "literalist" out of step with current biblical and social dialog.

The environment in which biblical authority is discussed is steeped in the tension

between the overlapping worldviews discussed earlier. In the world of modernity, all

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[1] *For the Bible Tells Me So,* Directed by Daniel G. Karslake. New York: First Run Features, 2007.

things can be measured as true or false in relation to the hard sciences. Postmodernism regards truth claims as no different than power claims, rejecting controlling and over-extended narratives. Biblical dialog seems to suffer under both analyses where genuine inquiry is often met with the muddy waters of stifling hermeneutic. As Catholic scholar Aidan Nichols observes, "Formerly, people saw nothing but God [in Scripture], now they might see nothing but humans."[2] Notwithstanding, it is still common practice of nearly every Christian church or organization to make an appeal in their governing documents to the importance of Scripture's authority.[3] The following section of this paper seeks to understand the issues concerning the authority of the Bible in the life of the Church, and explore some of the unique challenges imposed on the claims of Scripture in light of the present cultural environment.

Approaching Bibliology: The Authority of Scripture in the Church

Recent scholarship in systematic and philosophical theology has generated relatively little product in the study of Scripture itself, its claims of itself and of revelation. Contemporary theology often dismisses what the ancient text intends to say, as fewer scholars approach biblical studies with objective tools and hermeneutical methods. "In a fair amount of contemporary theology," Wright suggests, "the Bible has simply been a resource … without any overall sense of how Christian theology might either live under its authority or offer a theoretical account of what such authority might

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[2] Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 124.

[3] Wright, *The Last Word*, ix.

be."[4] Within this context, the Bible as a resource may offer fodder for theological controversy, contribute to ethical inquiry, or provide stimulus for personal devotion and worship, but little else. This paper addresses the changing modes of truth and authority in culture, and the challenge posed therein to the church. The premise argues that many of the epistemological as well as practical issues facing the church find their locus within bibliology. "The full range of Christian theological and practical categories … can and should inform any adequate Christian doctrine and practice of Scripture," according to Westmont College theologian Telford Work.[5] Thus, bibliology, a theology of Scripture itself, offers meaningful insight into the challenges posed to the twenty-first century Christian community.

Bibliolatry

Prior to a discussion of biblical authority in the Church, the accusation of bibliolatry within evangelicalism will be considered. As offered in the documentary example above, contemporary culture insists that the Church's adherence to the literalism of Scripture, especially among evangelicals, is inappropriate and leads to a damaging hermeneutic and practice. This is no longer merely a "liberal" position as recently there have been voices from within the evangelical camp making similar accusations. Biola University philosopher J.P. Moreland, refers to this as "evangelical over-commitment to the Bible."[6] He suggests that while devotion, submission, and promotion of the Word of

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[4] Wright, *The Last Word*, 17.

[5] Work, *Living and Active*, 8.

[6] J. P. Moreland, "How Evangelicals Became Over-Committed to the Bible and What Can Be Done About It," (essay, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, CA, November 14, 2007), 1.

God are proper practices of the Christian, there is a trend toward Scripture that can undermine those things. Moreland contends that the belief of the Bible as "the *sole* source of knowledge of God, morality, and a host of related important items," represents a shift away from Scripture's claims of itself, and promotes mean-spirited dialog and unhealthy notions of discipleship.[7] This indictment of the literalist approach to the Bible goes to the heart of authority issues in that there is a significant difference between Scripture as the ultimate authority and Scripture as the sole authority.

Some of the theological reasoning behind this shift may be attributed to a lack of robust inquiry among evangelicals in natural moral law and common grace.[8] However, Moreland sees that greater fault may lie in the social-historical shift of the last century as academic institutions sought to navigate the modern-postmodern tensions. Since the rise of these tensions the new goal of the university, suggests Moreland, "was not the discovery of truth, but the facilitating of research that could provide useful information against a background of changing truth."[9] Thus, while the sciences could thrive amidst evolving discoveries, the humanities were left with "the shuffling paradigms [of] different language games."[10] In other words, with the hard sciences occupying the sole domain of reality, the humanities were relegated to how one speaks of reality. Ethical and theological inquiries were increasingly pushed to the margins of academic research, and the resulting reaction among evangelical schools was to withdraw from the arena of

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[7] J. P. Moreland, "How Evangelicals Became Over-Committed to the Bible," 1.

[8] Ibid., 2.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Ibid.

higher thought and debate, "limiting truth and belief about God, theology and morality to the inerrant Word of God, the Bible."[11] If Moreland's concerns are warranted, "over-commitment" to Scripture can effectively hinder God-given epistemic endeavors. Further, such over-commitment to Scripture may damage theological clarity among many evangelicals who have "arguably displaced the Triune God as their most fundamental conviction," as Work cautions.[12]

Biblical Authority for the Contemporary Church

This distinction between Scripture as ultimate authority versus sole authority becomes pertinent to the present discussion in that it reveals the central tension between the evolving sensibilities of culture and the Church's submission to the Word of God. Historically, the Church often missteps when it cowers to shifting societal sensibilities. However, an appeal to the Bible's authority in the life of the believer and the economy of salvation must offer more than prooftexting and circular reasoning. Such an appeal ought to start where any healthy theology starts, with the nature of God. Therefore, to follow Wright's proposal, the concept of the "authority of Scripture" must be understood as shorthand for "the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture."[13]

Looking through this lens, there are dozens of proclamations God makes in the Old Testament to assert his sovereign authority, and likewise many New Testament assertions of Jesus' authority (Mt 28:18, Phil 2:9-11, Rv 4). Far from prooftexting internal claims, these passages indicate Scripture pointing "away from itself and to the

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[11] J. P. Moreland, "How Evangelicals Became Over-Committed to the Bible," 5.

[12] Work, *Living and Active,* 316.

[13] Wright, *The Last Word*, 23. Emphasis in the original.

fact that final and true authority belongs to God … delegated to Jesus Christ."[14] This is

not a diminishing of scriptural authority as much as it is a refinement of it, as clearly

Scripture is intended to have an authoritative voice within such parameters. One who

would approach Scripture, biblical scholar Kenneth Kantzer suggests, "is not like a

rudderless ship floating aimlessly on a boundless sea.…He is bound by the same hard

core of revelational facts which have determined orthodox thinking in the past."[15]

Clarifying what constitutes such a core of revelation remains a critical task for Christian

leaders in a contemporary setting.

The ultimate center of all biblical revelation, and therefore authority, begins with

the Person of God. The focus of revelation never was the Law, the people of God, or a set

of ethical or doctrinal truths. The trajectory of revelation is to present God as a Person,

and bring his creation into direct encounter with him. The Psalms abound with this

theme, and esteem the knowledge of God—in all his fierce judgment and steadfast love—

as the goal of the human experience (notably, Ps 76, 84, and 100). The New Testament

continues this thread with the incarnation. The ultimate act of revelation is God revealing

himself to his creation in the Person of Jesus: "God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,

but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son," (Heb 1:1-2). Knowing Christ,

therefore, is the essential response to the ultimate revelation, as Paul echoes in his

testimony to the Philippians, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the

surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord … that I may know him and the

power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,"

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[14] Wright, *The Last Word*, 24.

[15] Kenneth Kantzer, *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Millarad J. Erickson, (Grand Rapids: MI, Baker Book House, 1973), 161.

(Phil 3:8, 10). Kantzer concludes, then, that the "primary purpose of the Bible… is that man may come to know Jesus Christ, the living Word of God."[16] The Bible is, simply stated, the definitive record through which God's people discover his Person, relate his story, and participate in his mission to creation.

Critical Issues in Biblical Authority

An anonymous microblogger, with the sardonic user name "@almightygod," recently posted the following tweet: "To most Christians, the Bible is like a software license. Nobody actually reads it. They just scroll to the bottom and click 'I agree.'"[17] In a cynical manner, this highlights a common issue in the evangelical church: There is a distinct lack of reflective and critical thinking about Scripture among those who claim it as authoritative. Work suggests that "biblical practice enjoys an unproblematic place in the lives of many Christians. For them the mere assertion that the Bible is the Word of God is enough."[18] Still, there are a number of critical issues in bibliology that should be of real concern, not just to the Bible teacher, but to the average Christian. In the changing landscape of epistemic values and discernment, thoughtful engagement with Scripture and hermeneutics remains relevant to effective discipleship. Among these issues are the inerrancy of Scripture, and the place of the Bible in postmodern query.

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[16] Kantzer, *The Living God,* 165.

[17] @almightygod, Twitter post, August 16, 2010, 6:56 a.m.., http://twitter.com/alimightygod (accessed May 15, 2013).

[18] Work, *Living and Active*, 5.

Inerrancy

A full treatment of this topic goes beyond the scope of the current discussion, yet

it is worth a brief examination of particularly the most recent generation of scholarship

and evangelical thought. Consideration of the Bible's inerrancy appears to have a

polarizing effect within evangelicalism, and more than most theological issues in the

Church, has a direct impact on one's regard of authoritative revelation. The signatories of

the 1978 "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," considered the standard affirmation

of inerrancy among evangelicals, offer their sense of urgency behind crafting such a

statement: "To deny [inerrancy] is to set aside the witness of Jesus Christ.… We see it as

our timely duty to make this affirmation in the face of current lapses from the truth of

inerrancy among our fellow Christians."[19] Clearly, the last several generations of biblical

scholarship have seen a fair number of such "lapses" among more liberal schools of

theological thought, but germane to the present discussion is the growing divide among

scholars who self-identify with the evangelical camp. Over thirty years after the Chicago

Statement, many historically evangelical institutions appear to seek a measure of distance

with the Statement, and "do not discourage their faculty from having a critical view of

important elements of the document."[20]

Some of the difficulty in finding healthy consensus among evangelicals is the

resulting polemic often connected to the issue. To resist the concept of inerrancy on any

level is, by nature of the term, to embrace some allowance of error in Scripture.

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[19] International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," (Chicago, October, 1978).

[20] Gregory K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 20.

Therefore, it is important to ascertain what one means by inerrancy, infallibility, and other related terms of the Bible's authority. New Testament scholar Peter Enns, himself a critic of the Chicago Statement, offers his baseline definition of inerrancy: "I affirm that I am committed to the Bible's inerrancy as a function of its divine origin … the Bible as it is is without error because the Bible as it is is God's Word."[21] Enns recognizes that such a definition will not satisfy many, and it offers no analysis regarding in what way Scripture is without error, therefore there must be additional criteria for framing inerrancy and identifying what constitutes "error." Two criteria that provide such a framework are context and content.

First, Scripture must be understood within its cultural context. The Bible is a product of its ancient Near Middle Eastern origins: "If the soul of Scripture is universal and eternal, its body remains Oriental."[22] Among the implications for this is the understanding that modern criteria for literature should not be imposed on an ancient Middle Eastern writing. These can include scientific accuracy and phenomenological descriptions, exact verbal agreement in parallel accounts of an event, and the recording of exact quotations that originated in an oral tradition. Article XIII of the Chicago Statement seems to concede such allowance: "We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision … observational descriptions of nature … variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations."[23]

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[21] Peter Enns, "Inerrancy," A Time to Tear Down a Time to Build Up, http://peterennsonline.com/ii/inerrancy/ (accessed February 19, 2013).

[22] Everett Harrison, "Criteria of Biblical Inerrancy," *Christianity Today* Jan 20, 1958, 16-17.

[23] International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy."

A second criterion for evaluating inerrancy is Scripture's faithfulness to the unity of its content and purpose.[24] Divergent detail within parallel accounts is both an issue of literary context as well as overall purpose of content. For example, variance of story among the four Gospel accounts was not cause for criticism, but for canonical approval. The Muratorian Canon (circa. AD 200) notes this: "And therefore, though various rudiments are taught in the several Gospel books, yet that matters nothing for the faith of believers, since by the one and guiding Spirit everything is declared in all: concerning the birth, concerning the passion, concerning the resurrection.…"[25] The four accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus, though they misalign on several details of narrative, are one in unity and purpose. This principle should be applied broadly to the divine witness of Scripture.

An example from a contemporary debate may provide insight into the use of context and content as criteria for determining inerrancy. Within modern scholarship, there is a general consensus regarding the authorship of Isaiah as a collaboration of three or more writers, editors, and contributors. According to William Sanford LaSor et al, "the traditional view that Isaiah wrote the entire book is held by exceedingly few scholars."[26] While there remain many theories and analyses of the structure and authorship of Isaiah, a common breakdown is the so-called First Isaiah (chapters 1-39), Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55), and Third Isaiah (chapters 56-66), each written by different authors at

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[24] Harrison, "Criteria of Biblical Inerrancy," 16.

[25] "The Muratorian Canon" The Development of the Canon of the New Testament, http://www.ntcanon.org/Muratorian_Canon.shtml (accessed February 20, 2013).

[26] William Sanford Lasor, David Allan Hubbard, Frederic William Bush, Leslie C. Allen, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 281.

different periods.[27] The challenge arises when Isaiah is referenced in the New Testament, specifically in the Gospels, and is attributed to the prophet himself. For example, In Matthew 3:3, quoting Isaiah 40:3: "For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah *when he said*, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness.'" The Gospel writer clearly identifies a personal voice attributed to the historical individual of Isaiah. In Mark 7:6, Jesus himself quotes from Isaiah 29:13: "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips.…'" again, attributing the quote to a personal voice. Over twenty additional New Testament references to Isaiah echo these examples by appearing to uphold the singular authorship of the book of Isaiah.

If contemporary scholarship is correct, that Isaiah is a work of multiple authors, the reader must make some conclusions about these references. One possibility is that Jesus and the New Testament writers were simply in error. They were subject to the conventional thinking of their time without access to the critical studies of today. Herein lies the challenge to inerrancy: if the New Testament promotes an erroneous view of Isaiah's authorship, it becomes vulnerable to other error. Another option is Jesus used a tactic of accommodation "in order to facilitate his communication of the message from the book."[28] Had Jesus revealed the assembled origin of the prophetic work, it may have drawn focus away from his central message. A final posited solution is that the scholarship is simply wrong. This is the view of New Testament scholar G.K. Beale who concludes, "the clear New Testament stance on this topic confirms the long-established

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[27] Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism*, 134.

[28] Ibid., 144.

arguments within the book of Isaiah itself—the prophet Isaiah authored the complete book."[29]

Like Beale, conservative scholar Richard Schultz maintains that Isaiah represents a litmus test of orthodoxy: "The one-Isaiah position may be the only one that takes the book's own claims seriously."[30] However, this may stretch the parameters of inerrancy beyond their intention. Applying the two criteria of context and content, the reader may yet embrace the authority of Scripture while recognizing the contribution of modern analysis. With regard to context, one is reminded that the New Testament authors were products of their time; the criteria of modern literature should not be upheld in evaluating them. Isaiah's authorship is a phenomenological issue of its day, not very different from the language of the sun "rising" over the earth. In other words, whether or not Jesus as the God-Man knew of the historical origins of Isaiah, he employed the language of his day, referring to the literary unit known as "Isaiah," and attributing it to the historical individual. This is within the parameters of ancient literature, and not in conflict with orthodoxy. Further, the content of such quotations of Isaiah in the New Testament and the essential hermeneutical issue of determining the writer's intention are to be considered. Enns maintains that "the New Testament authors were not engaging the Old Testament in an effort to remain consistent with the original context … they were commenting on what the text meant."[31] In short, the New Testament writers were invoking the Old Testament

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[29] Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism*, 159.

[30] Richard Schultz, *How Many Isaiahs Were There and What Does It Matter?: Prophetic Inspiration in Recent Evangelical Scholarship*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 151.

[31] Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 115.

in light of the ministry of Messiah. Matters of authorship, history, and original occasion, while certainly not unimportant, were not germane to the central message.

Inerrancy is a doctrinal apparatus employed to maintain adherence to the authority of Scripture and the truth of God's Word. These are no doubt crucial issues for the Christian leader and disciple. Unfortunately, it has been wielded at times with such a heavy hand, it can foster the "evangelical over-commitment" of the Bible noted above and detract from core concerns of authority. With changes in cultural notions of truth and authority, "an understanding of what eventually will be meant by 'authority' of the Bible… is indeed a critical question," believes postfoundational theologian J. Wentzel van Huyssteen.[32] A further consideration of that question, in light of postmodern trending, will be considered in the next section. A final exhortation on the issue of the Bible's truthfulness and trustworthiness is offered by Everett Harrison: "Those who are hostile to the claim of the veracity of Scripture commonly expect too little of the Bible. Its friends, on the other hand, may err in expecting too much."[33]

Biblical Authority in Postmodern Dialog

In Chapter 1, a brief overview of postmodern development and thinking was offered, with particular focus on the epistemological assumptions of the worldview. In this section the discussion returns to the influence of postmodernism, with emphasis on biblical authority and hermeneutics. If inerrancy was one of the critical issues in biblical discourse over the last century, the influence of postmodern epistemologies offers, in the

[32] van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 142.

[33] Harrison, *The Living God*, 315.

words of Wright, "a sustained ideological challenge not only to many ancient and modern texts but to modernism itself."[34] Two areas where postmodern dialog intersects with biblical inquiry and practice will be considered, namely the experiential and the textual.

As described in the earlier overview, postmodernity is, in part, more of a reaction to modernity than it is its own epistemological system. One central feature is the replacement of the objective and empirical with the subjective and experiential. Stemming from its architectural roots, postmodernism strives to exchange cold, detached utility with contextualized individual experience. The invitation to a subjective encounter with Scripture is understood as the context in which one hears and responds to the Bible. One's personal background of such formative factors as ethnicity, socio-economic status, health, and relationships becomes the chief hermeneutical lens. Additionally, this context can apply to what some believe to be the subjective, "unfinished narratives" of Scripture.[35] The stories of redemption told through creation, Israel, Jesus, and the Church provide a maze of intertwined stories both to be informed by, and inform the reader's own story.[36]

Yale Divinity School professor Leander Keck, early into his consideration of postmodernism in his own field of New Testament studies, was eager to embrace the shift toward an experiential hermeneutic. In Keck's estimation, a postmodern application frees the text from conventional liberal scholarship that tends to analyze Scripture as a collection of "liberal-ethical religious ideas," and rather considers the Bible as "the epic

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[34] Wright, *The Last Word*, 97.

[35] Colin J. D. Greene and Martin Robinson, *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 2008), 117.

[36] Ibid.

story of God's acts that through God's Word confronts us with a call to faith and obedience."[37] The meaning of the text, no longer a detached pursuit of information, becomes a "transaction between reader and text," something beyond the typical fruits of research.[38]

From the other end of the theological spectrum, many evangelical conservatives have found a postmodern filter can elevate one's approach to the Bible. "Postmodernism [may provide] more appropriate resources for evangelicalism's philosophical underpinnings," suggests Bethel College theology professor Roger Olson.[39] Further, Olson contends that an intentionally more subjective experience with Scripture speaks to the heart of discipleship in which "the essence of both Christianity and theology, then, is not propositional truths enshrined in doctrines but a narrative-shaped experience."[40]

At what point the subjective voice encroaches on the authoritative voice of God in Scripture will be addressed in later chapters, but clearly the tools of postmodern inquiry have found their way into academic biblical studies. However, where the subjective and contextual approach to Scripture finds its most practical outlet is in the ongoing practice of spiritual communities. Doug Pagitt, the founder and pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, has been an active participant in the "emergent" movement of churches, a loosely gathered movement of congregations and leaders seeking to employ fresh cultural

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[37] Leander Keck, "The Premodern Bible in the Postmodern World," *Interpretation* 50, no. 2 (April 1996): 130.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Roger E. Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age," *Christian Century*, May 3, 1995, 480.

[40] Ibid.

understandings to the environment of the worshiping community. Embracing the

postmodern approach of the subjective experience, Pagitt describes a "people-centered

rather than only idea-centered" Bible study at Solomon's Porch:[41]

> We read through rather large sections of the Bible … from a few different translations. We talk about the issues raised, any elements that are confusing, and what the passage tells us about our role in God's story… This group is like a microcosm of our community, standing in for others as we enter into the passage.[42]

In this context, the Bible occupies a role more akin to a contributing member and less of a

repository of information to be dissected. Conversely, the congregation is elevated from

passive learner to active participant, and each voice speaks with a degree of authority.

While this can result in a joyful and poignant discovery of Scripture in community, such

an approach may lead to a potentially problematic environment from which to discern

God's voice. Wright compares the allure of purely subjective hermeneutic to a garden:

"'Experience' is what grows by itself in the garden. 'Authority' is what happens when the

gardener … [tends] the weeds in order to let beauty and fruitfulness triumph."[43] While an

authoritarian church can certainly prune all the vitality out of a congregation, an overly

experiential church may let undergrowth increase unchecked.

The second issue to be considered within postmodernism's intersection with

biblical dialog is the treatment of the text itself. This leads into complex epistemological

analyses, but a summary understanding is helpful here in an effort to understand how it

relates to the issue of biblical authority. In essence, postmodern analysis posits that

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[41] Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 2005), 113.

[42] Ibid., 114.

[43] Wright, *The Last Word*, 104.

meaning in a given text is a function of how the reader responds to the text through his or her own socially constructed presuppositions.[44] This is commonly held as a "deconstructionist" approach to the text, in that conventional pairings of writing/meaning, intent/interpretation, and author/reader are overturned or deconstructed.[45] Within biblical studies, this has relevant ramifications. Theologian Walter Bruggemann pioneered a deconstructionist approach to Scripture, claiming that "it is, however, now clear that what one knows and sees depends upon where one stands or sits."[46] He goes on to offer a difference between certitude and fidelity within a given text; while the latter is where the reader strives to arrive, the former is inaccessible because of the reader's presuppositions and the inability the reader has to discern the author's intent.[47] University of Chichester Professor Steven Moyise further affirms this view, stating that "authorial intention is a 'construct' rather than a 'given.'"[48]

If one understands that part of the reader's task is to interpret authorial intent, then it is plausible to speak of it in terms of a "construct," but to presume, then, that this constructed meaning is a "pure, new creation of the reader and has no substantial link to the original meaning," one may argue, goes beyond the fair expectations of the text.[49] While deconstructionist approaches to the biblical text have informed new ways a text

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[44] Stanford University, "Jacques Derrida," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/ (accessed February 25, 2013).

[45] Ibid.

[46] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis. MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993), 8.

[47] Ibid., 98.

[48] Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the New*, (New York: Continuum, 2001), 58.

[49] Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism*, 252.

can be heard and understood (regardless of the authorial intent), many times they have

merely served as indicators for perceived political or ideological bias.[50] In summary, a

full deconstructionist approach to Scripture renders the author's intent, and therefore the

divine intent, unrecognizable. What remains would be little more than the idiosyncratic

wordplay of Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty character:

> "I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I
> meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"
> "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means
> just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many
> different things."[51]

Conclusions

The authority of the Bible, within the scope of the Church's mission and mandate,

remains a hotly contested issue, for what is at stake is nothing less than how one discerns

the voice of God. The largely twentieth-century debate of inerrancy, and the emerging

twenty-first century debate on postmodernism provide relevant test cases for how

Christian leaders and worshipers engage with Scripture in light of cultural and worldview

issues. In the following chapters, this paper will examine the historic teaching of the

Church regarding truth and biblical authority. Understanding the central issues of the role

of Scripture in the mission and history of the church allows better evaluation of which

currently held conventions can be loosed or redesigned.

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[50] Wright, *The Last Word*, 98.

[51] Lewis Carroll, *Through Looking Glass* (Seattle: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010), 67.

CHAPTER 4

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN THE CHURCH:
ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL, AND REFORMATION THEOLOGY

> Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of
> them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this
> twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.
> —Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine*

The development of Scripture came from both literary and revelatory means,

creating a dynamic between God and his creatures that will not be static. Our epistemic

relationship with God, therefore, is one requiring "continual divine action in the knowing

process," in step with our continued efforts to understand him through his Word.[1] Much

of the history of the Church is a chronicle of this effort, as the view of the authority and

role of the Bible cycles through the different stages of the Church's mission and each

era's historical context. In this chapter, relevant approaches to bibliology will be

examined among key thinkers in the ancient, medieval, and reformation periods of the

Church. As the Church encountered new challenges to faith from both inside

controversies and outside influences, the understanding of biblical authority evolved and

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[1] John R. Franke, *Character of Theology, The: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003) 77.

differing emphasis was placed on biblical doctrine. Such evolving doctrinal emphasis, and the resulting response from the Church, can help inform the present challenge of biblical proclamation within the context of the digital age.

Athanasius: The Word in Creation, Fall, and Redemption

Athanasius enjoys a privileged place in Church history as a beloved saint and scholar within the major traditions of Christianity: Coptic, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. The fourth century bishop of Alexandria continues to exert a strong influence on the Church, guiding Christians to "appreciate Scripture in terms of God's overall purpose."[2] It is this theological perspective of God's redemptive plan that informs Athanasius' theology of Scripture. This is best understood in light of his debates over the Arian controversies; ultimately his battle for doctrinal clarity within soteriology would be fought on the field of biblical authority.[3] While the central focus in his broader cosmology is the character and the work of the Trinity, he offers an early account of the Church's understanding of the relationship between the incarnate Word and the written Word of God.[4]

This relationship begins with an understanding of the role of the Word in creation: "He made all things out of nothing through His own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, and of all these His earthly creatures He reserved especial mercy for the race of men."[5] The act

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[2] Work, *Living and Active*, 36.

[3] James D. Ernest, "Athanasius of Alexandria: The Scope of Scripture in Polemical and Pastoral Context" *Vigiliae Christianae* 47, no. 4 (Dec., 1993): 341.

[4] Work, *Living and Active*, 6.

[5] Athanasius *The Incarnation of the Word of God* §3.

of creation anticipates the further act of redemption whereby in both there is a giving and restoring of a divine quality. The catalyst of this quality is the Word; the agent who creates is the same who redeems: "This, then, was the plight of men. God not only made them out of nothing, but had also graciously bestowed on them His own life (*zoe*) by the grace of the Word."[6] Having been created by the Word, and given the *imago dei* through the Word, humankind enjoys an epistemological privilege not afforded to the rest of creation. This relationship between soteriology and epistemology provides the first entry point into Athanasius' doctrine of Scripture wherein the *imago dei* has a purpose, namely to know the One for whom it was created. Work says, "for Athanasius, humanity is created for the exercise of rationality, which can only happen with God the *logos*, through whom it apprehends the Father."[7]

The entrance of sin and the resulting fall creates a dilemma for God as corruption reigns over what was created as good. While God cannot countermand his own decree of death for disobedience, neither can he let sin destroy humankind's ability for reason and the knowledge of God. It is unacceptable, as Athanasius states, "that beings which had once shared the nature (*logika*) of the Word should perish."[8] The elegant remedy, of course, is the self-giving, self-sacrificing entrance of the Word into fallen creation. Even here Athanasius maintains a connection between the dilemma of human depravity and epistemological realities, for it is by the *teaching* of the Word, as well as his sacrifice, whereby we are saved: "that none save our Lord Jesus Christ could give mortals

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[6] Athanasius *The Incarnation of the Word of God* §5.

[7] Work, *Living and Active*, 39.

[8] Athanasius *The Incarnation of the Word of God* §6.

immortality, and that only the Word Who orders all things and is alone the Father's true and sole-begotten Son could *teach* men about Him."[9] It is God's gift of language and rationality that even allows fallen creation to discern this teaching and converse with the Word.

It is in the culminating work of redemption where Athanasius offers his most intentional connection between the incarnate Word and written revelation. For the salvific power of the teaching of Jesus does not lie in the words themselves, but through the living *logos*, Christ renders the text living and transcendent. While the words of a dead teacher "effects nothing whatever, but lies as lifeless and ineffective," the living Word gives power to the *kerygma*.[10] Ascribing the nature of Scripture in Hebrews 4:12 to Jesus, Athanasius calls the Son "living and effective… active every day and effects the salvation of all."[11] The task of interpreting and illuminating Scripture can only happen through the ongoing presence of the Word in sanctification or *theosis*: "Anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life."[12] Again, Athanasius addresses soteriological issues within an epistemological framework, where knowledge and language are "both means and results of salvation."[13]

Fourth century theology was primarily concerned with Trinitarian and soteriological matters, resulting in mostly inferred bibliological considerations. While

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[9] Athanasius *The Incarnation of the Word of God* §20. Emphasis added.

[10] Ibid., §31

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., §57.

[13] Work, *Living and Active,* 45.

Athanasius' canon included the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, it had yet to be fixed during the time of the Alexandrian bishop. However, his contribution to the process of canonization effectively places the *logos* of the godhead as the source and the superior to the *graphe* of the emerging canon, without diminishing the importance and authority of the latter.

Athanasius provides the Church with the early development of what will become a recurring theme in its relationship with Scripture: Biblical authority stands and falls with one's Christology. The Bible is living and active because Jesus, the Word of God, is alive and active. The Good News is good because Christ is good. Scripture has authority because Jesus is Lord. As will be shown below, the reformers will again take up this theme, as will Barth, and eventually evangelical leaders. Still, it is Athanasius' contribution, even prior to the codification of the New Testament writings, which provides a foundation for a theology of Scripture. The Church would soon need to address more intently the issues of biblical authority and hermeneutic, and another great leader of the North African church will provide guiding insight in that discussion.

Augustine: The Nature and Intent of Scripture

While remaining steeped in the same high Christology of the Alexandrian school as Athanasius, Augustine, fifth century bishop of Hippo, offers a more epistemological or even technical approach to Scripture. Work recognizes the difference between the two Church fathers: "Where Athanasius tends to concentrate on the Word, Augustine tends to concentrate on words. Athanasius is more macroscopic in scope, Augustine more

microscopic."[14] Throughout his works, Augustine's treatment of Scripture is extensive, some maintaining that an estimated two-thirds of the biblical text could be assembled from his various quotations of Scripture.[15]

Among these is the influential collection of writings, *On Christian Doctrine*, first written in the year 397. In this work, Augustine continues much of the teaching of Athanasius, emphasizing the transformation of the Incarnate Word, and expounding on the chief Alexandrian school priorities of divine action and human understanding.[16] While he covers areas of doctrine including cosmology, Christology, hermeneutical theory, and scriptural commentary, it is his treatment of semiotics and epistemology as these relate to Scripture that provide an intersection with this present discussion. In the opening statement of Book I in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine lays the epistemological groundwork for understanding Scripture: "There are two things on which all interpretation of Scripture depends: the mode of ascertaining the proper meaning, and the mode of making known the meaning when it is ascertained."[17] From these two modes, one may understand key concepts of Augustine's bibliology: the ontology or nature of Scripture, and the teleology or intent of Scripture.

In Book I of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine declares that the cosmos is a signifying cosmos. In other words, creation is replete with signs that point to "things," the use of "things" meaning "in a strict sense, to signify that which is never employed as a

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[14] Work, *Living and Active*, 50.

[15] Mervin Deems, "Augustine's Use of Scripture," *Church History*, 14 no. 3 (Sept. 1945): 189.

[16] Work, *Living and Active,* 51.

[17] Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 1.1.1

sign of anything else."[18] Augustine understands verbal and written discourse as signs that

signify the contents of the mind and soul in order for others to hear and understand.[19] In

this sense, Scripture's prophetic passages are signs that point to God and provide a path

of salvation. Work suggests that the Quran (called a "book of signs"), and even the

Hebrew Scriptures, operate under the premise that signs point from the bottom up, and

outline the path of redemption through prophetic utterance.[20] Augustine insists this is

insufficient, that salvation must lie beyond the signs of creation's own capacity. The

incarnate Word of God, then, is the ultimate Sign, and how one understands and

interprets this Sign is critical to understanding Augustine's ontology of Scripture. The

Word becomes flesh and signifies itself, and while all creation is significant—that is,

signifying—Scripture occupies a privileged place:

> Of all, then, that has been said since we entered upon the discussion about things,
> this is the sum: that we should clearly understand that the fulfillment and the end
> of the Law, and of all Holy Scripture, is the love of an object which is to be
> enjoyed, and the love of an object which can enjoy that other in fellowship with
> ourselves.[21]

This becomes the foundation for Augustine's view of the nature of Scripture: the

signifying words of the apostles and prophets, and the self-signifying incarnate Word

come together as the ultimate indicator of divine love. Scripture, then, serves as mediator

between the incarnation and interpretation.

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[18] Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 1.2.2

[19] Ibid.,1.13

[20] Work, *Living and Active*, 55.

[21] Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.39

The second concern of Augustine regarding the role and authority of the Bible is his treatment of the teleology of Scripture. Understanding Augustinian theology of the Incarnation "tells us much about the intent of Scripture."[22] In Book II of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine continues his semiotic and epistemological inquiry of Scripture, revealing what he poses as the ultimate intent of words and language of the Bible: "And in reading it, men seek nothing more than to find out the thought and will of those by whom it was written, and through these to find out the will of God."[23] Note that he identifies both the human agency in Scripture, as well as the divine agency. While the divine authorial intent takes precedence, Augustine does not deny the intention of the human authors. Nor does he pose some equation or formula of divine and human intention.[24] Augustine recognizes an overlap of the divine and human interests; the two are connected but remain distinct.[25]

This distinction offers a unique approach to the problem often encountered when it comes to distinguishing issues of human authorship and interpretation. Even through his own apostolic perspective, Peter addresses this: "Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit," (2 Pt 2:20-21). Augustine recognizes that authorial intent is a challenge

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[22] Work, *Living and Active*, 57.

[23] Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 2.5.6

[24] Work, *Living and Active*, 58.

[25] Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 1.36.41

to prove, yet this interplay between divine and human agency allows for an open-handed approach to interpretation, while fully endorsing the authority of God's Word.

The influence of Augustine can hardly be overstated. While only dealing with a small fraction of his teaching here, it is widely acknowledged that Augustine's work extends in all directions of the Church. Schaff offers that among the Latin Fathers, "he shines as the brightest star."[26] Within the Augustinian corpus, the twenty-first-century Church is indebted to his work in biblical dialog. His interplay between the *logos* as a signifier of divine nature as well as divine intent plays well within postmodern and post-foundational dialog. While avoiding the language deconstruction leanings of the postmodernist, Augustine allows for an emphasis on words and language as signs that equate to ontological realities. Both faith and reason are to be regarded enthusiastically as the Church seeks to hear and understand authoritative revelation in the Word of God. These two realms are further explored as the medieval context of bibliology is considered in the next section.

Thomas Aquinas: Natural Law and Divine Revelation

By the late fourth century, the Church in the West had emerged as the dominant influence in the Empire.[27] As the central narrative for the Empire shifted from paganism to Christendom, leaders like Athanasius and Augustine sought to anchor this new intellectual presence through robust debate and inquiry. The Early Middle Ages saw the decline of Roman dominance, and with that a decline in literary and scholarly output in

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[26] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, v.3, 3rd ed. (London: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1016.

[27] Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1981), 125.

the West, even as an Islamic presence was beginning to challenge Europe.[28] By the

thirteenth century, the Church was in need of a more vigorous and holistic view of

Christian doctrine, including an approach to Scripture. Thomas Aquinas would emerge as

the most influential Christian thinker of the Middle Ages, his influence continuing well

into the modern era of the Church.

Prior to Thomas, the role occupied by Scripture at the time of the thirteenth

century was largely limited to the liturgical. Scripture was understood to be the "Book of

the Church" in that it was almost exclusively used in public worship.[29] While this role

preceded a more scholarly approach, it is important to note that the liturgical setting for

Scripture is in part determined by the theological context in which a community

encounters Scripture. However, it was at this time that a movement of Scripture as a

scholarly vehicle began to reemerge. Many monastic movements of the High Middle

Ages began extending their study of Scripture to a higher critical approach, resulting in a

proliferation of academic zeal throughout the West.[30] Such study, of course, would

remain the privilege of the literate and the upper class, of which Thomas certainly was,

eventually becoming a scholar and professor of the Dominican order.

Thomas' contribution to Christian thinking is immense, and from this teaching

one may form a Thomist view of Scripture. While his emphasis was not specifically in

the area of the Bible's role and authority, he made considerable contribution to Christian

thought on knowledge and revelation. Central to a Thomist worldview are the concepts of

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[28] Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 171.

[29] Wilhelmus Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000), 212.

[30] Ibid., 213.

natural law and divine law, the former being that which "each one knows, and is conscious of, what is good and what is evil;" the latter being "the additional law given by God, whereby man shares more perfectly in the eternal law."[31] Scripture consists of that special grace by which God gives humankind a unique revelation inaccessible by reason alone, yet the place of natural law is critical in that it provided a "holistic medieval worldview," informing the epistemological foundation of that age.[32]

Some evangelical scholars have overstated Thomas' intent, seeing in his work the creation of a rift between natural law and divine law.[33] Should such a separation exist, one might be able to point to Thomist teaching as a seed of the Enlightenment, leading to what would emerge as modern humanism and relativism. However, a healthy understanding of Thomas' view of the superiority of special revelation answers that accusation. While Thomas made significant contributions to modern philosophical study, he never considered himself a philosopher, whom he ultimately saw as pagans, "falling short of the true and proper wisdom to be found in Christian revelation."[34] From his central work, *Summa Theologiæ*, it is clear that Thomas' core epistemological beliefs were grounded in his certainty that divine revelation was superior to the efforts of reason alone:

> Hence we must say that for the knowledge of any truth whatsoever man needs Divine help, that the intellect may be moved by God to its act … and yet at times

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[31] Thomas, *Summa Theologiæ*, II-I, Q.91, art.4.

[32] Wright, *The Last Word*, 79.

[33] Notably, Francis Schaeffer in the book and film series, *How Should We Then Live?,* calls into question the value of Thomist teaching for an evangelical worldview. See Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 55.

[34] Brian Davies, *Aquinas* (London: Continuum, 2002), 14.

God miraculously instructs some by His grace in things that can be known by natural reason, even as He sometimes brings about miraculously what nature can do.[35]

What Thomas did offer was nonetheless a challenging view within his historical context: truth can be ascertained both through natural as well as divine agents. The existence of God, while assumed in Scripture, could be demonstrated through reason, because, as reformed theologian R.C. Sproul suggests in his defense of Thomas, "all truth meets at the top."[36] The Bible is all true, but it does not contain all truth, so says a Thomist view of Scripture. In contrast with the advancing Islamic thought of the thirteenth century that sought to separate religious truths from Aristotelian truth, Thomas provided a cohesive approach to epistemology and divine authority.

Thomas, regarded by many as one of the greatest theologians and philosophers of the Church, was also a prolific expositor, considering no part of Holy Scripture as being "idle or for no purpose so far as our instruction goes."[37] Thomas' commentaries on the Pauline corpus reveal significant insight into his approach on biblical teaching. His exposition of Paul's letters maintains a unity of theme, namely the grace of Christ. Rarely delving into allegorical meaning, his treatment of the epistles is in a manner more closely associated with a critical, academic approach, yet he will venture into homiletic observation at given points, as with his commentary on Philemon 20: "That is why he adds, 'console my heart.' A man is consoled spiritually when the desires of his heart are

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[35] *Summa* II-I, Q.109, art. 1.

[36] R. C. Sproul, "The Christian and Science (Part 2)," Reformed Theology Articles at Ligonier.org, http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/christian-and-science-part-2/ (accessed March 2, 2013).

[37] M.C. D'Arcy, ed., *Selected Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1950), 811.

fulfilled."[38] Such an approach, equally adept in the academy and the parish, was a new breed of biblical teacher in the thirteenth century, and yet in three hundred years it would provide a model for another young monk whose bibliology would revolutionize the Church.

Sola Scriptura: The Reformers and the Bible

By the early sixteenth century, the dogma of the Church had reached swelling proportions with Rome exerting power and influence well beyond matters of faith and practice. The rift created begun by Martin Luther was fought on the battlefield of authority, as Reformers challenged the teaching of Rome on every critical front: the atonement, justification, and ecclesial authority. The Reformation cry *Sola Scriptura* capsulated the claim that the Bible alone was sufficient revelation. This claim was never intended to teach one must believe the Scripture in its entirety to be saved, but rather "nothing *beyond* Scripture is to be taught as needing to be believed in order for one to be saved."[39] With this, the reformers set the authority of the Bible squarely against the authority of the Church, or more specifically, against the notion of Rome's authoritative tradition.

The Reformation never intended to remove tradition from the Christian experience, it did however, as summarized by Church historian R.P.C. Hanson, seek to reframe it as, "a necessary part of the Christian faith, but … judged by and found

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[38] M.C. D'Arcy, ed., *Selected Writings*, 820.

[39] Wright, *The Last Word*, 72 (emphasis in original).

agreeable to Scripture."[40] Through the various creeds of the reformers, the concept of

Sola Scriptura is expounded, in great part through their condemnation of Roman regard

for tradition. Biblical authority begins with an appeal to divine authority over the

authority of the Church, as expressed by the Augsburg Confession:

> Nothing is taught in our churches concerning articles of faith that is contrary to the Holy Scriptures or what is common to the Christian church. However, inasmuch as some abuses have been corrected… we have not acted in an unchristian and frivolous manner but have been compelled by God's command (which is rightly to be regarded as above all custom) to allow such changes.[41]

Likewise, the apostolic authority of the Scripture is to be esteemed as greater than the

Church's authority, as delineated in the widely recognized Second Helvetic Confession:

"We do likewise reject human tradition, which, although they set out with godly titles, as

though they were divine and apostolical … yet, being compared with the Scriptures,

disagree with them; and that by their disagreement betray themselves in no wise to be

apostolical."[42] Finally, it is Scripture's singular authority that is superior to the Church's

authority, as described in the Articles of the Church of England:

> It is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written.… Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of the Holy Writ, as it not ought to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.[43]

The clear and unanimous teaching of the reformers was that tradition had wrongly

risen to a place of equal or greater authority than the Bible, and was to be subject to

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[40] R.P.C. Hanson, "Tradition," in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 575.

[41] Preface to Article XXII of the Augsburg Confession, in John Leith, ed., *Creed of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Lousville, KY: John Knox, 1982), 79.

[42] Chapter 2 of the Second Helvetic Confession, in Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches*, 136.

[43] Article XX of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, in Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches*, 273.

judgment through the very Scripture it undermined. The Reformation, as a realignment of

theologies concerning justification and atonement, touched on issues of the nature of

authority and revelation incidentally, yet left many other issues of Christian faith and

practice unresolved. One of the key outcomes of the Reformation, as Wright affirms, is

the methodology of reason and biblical inquiry, allowing Scripture to speak through the

use of reason and critical thinking, challenging tradition, "including 'Reformation'

traditions themselves, insofar as scripture itself encouraged us to do so."[44]

In the centuries following Luther and Calvin, the rise of higher criticism would

become a new challenge for the Church and the role of authoritative revelation, as

discussed in Chapter 1. This challenge will result in the formulation of theological

approaches that would emerge as the most influential schools of biblical dialog of the

twentieth century. The following chapter will consider modern movements in biblical

dialog, the resulting counter movements, and the impact of these on the present day

challenge to knowledge and authority in the Church.

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[44] Wright, *The Last Word*, 77.

CHAPTER 5

CONTEMPORARY TEACHING
ON THE AUTHORITY AND ROLE OF SCRIPTURE

The best theology would need no advocates; it would prove itself.
—Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*

In the early years of the twentieth century, biblical scholarship broadly fell into

one of two camps: progressive liberalism, fueled by higher critical methods and scientific

rationalistic thinking; and biblical fundamentalism, which was largely a reaction to the

former.[1] In the subsequent decades, new approaches to biblical dialog and theology

would emerge that would seek to provide an alternative framework to liberalism and

fundamentalism. The movements that would be labeled neo-orthodoxy and neo-

evangelicalism would eventually contribute to the dominant narratives of twentieth-

century theological inquiry, shaping much of the thinking of the Church in the west for

the next century. In this chapter, consideration will be given to the major tenets and

influences of these schools of thought as they provide a foundational basis for present-

day teaching in the Church. Additionally, the lives and ministry convictions of the two

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[1] Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 449.

key leaders in these movements will be considered, as they provide a compelling challenge for today's Christian leaders striving for the Word of God.

Karl Barth: Neo-orthodoxy and Scripture

What would become the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth was borne out of the crisis of the early twentieth century as two world wars and state totalitarianism from both the left and right tore through Europe, making liberalism "increasingly irrelevant."[2] A new engagement with God, less detached and more existentially tenable, was primed for broad acceptance. While teaching theology in Bonn, Barth was driven from Germany at the rise of Nazism. He returned to his native Switzerland in 1935 to continue the formulation of his theological thought, including his massive work, *Church Dogmatics*.[3] Fueling much of his writing, Barth intended to establish a relationship between the infallible Word of God and the human words of Scripture. This thinking would become the foundation of his contribution, and arguably his most lasting influence.

The Threefold Word of God

As a significant portion of *Church Dogmatics* deals directly with the relationship between God and Scripture, an understanding of Barth's legacy in present day Christian teaching begins with his threefold Word of God paradigm. In *Dogmatics*, Barth stresses that the Bible is not a book of humanity's thought on God, but it is God's thought and movement on behalf of man. He states:

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[2] Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 445.

[3] Ibid.

> The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves in him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham's spiritual children and which he has sealed once for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible. The word of God is within the Bible.[4]

Human experience, historical inquiry, and scientific progress are not adequate starting points for theological discovery; rather, the understanding of God begins with the Word of God. Barth's threefold paradigm consists of the *revealed* Word in the incarnation of Jesus, the *written* Word in the Holy Scriptures, and the *proclaimed* Word in the *kerygma* of the Church. In Barth's teaching, these three serve to provide the substance of all divine revelation.[5]

The revealed Word of God in the incarnation of Jesus is driven by the foremost theological issue of Christology. As with the patristic teachers, Barth can only arrive at an understanding of revelation through the lens of humanity's redemption: "Revelation in fact does not differ from the person of Jesus Christ nor from the reconciliation accomplished in him. To say revelation is to say 'The Word became flesh.'"[6] At virtually every stage in his theological approach, Barth presupposes a Christocentric premise, positioning Christ in the biblical witness as the "one mediator between God and man." Through the revealed Word, God extends himself to humanity ultimately in a relational expression. The incarnation becomes, therefore, not only the ultimate expression and center of God's work, but all things find their origins in the incarnate Word: "without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn 1:3).

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[4] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), II/1, 336.

[5] Ibid., I/1, 88.

[6] Ibid., I/1, 119.

The written Word of God as found in canonical Scripture continues Barth's

Christocentric theology. The role of the Bible is to point to Christ and the Christ event:

"The fact that God's own address becomes an event in the human word of the Bible is,

however, God's affair and not ours.… The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God

causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it."[7] In keeping with his

Trinitarian analogy of the Word of God, Barth maintains that Scripture, as with Christ,

occupies two natures fully; in the Holy Writ there is correspondence to its humanity, and

in its holiness to divinity.[8] Barth's consideration of what he terms the "particulars," such

as historical setting and the inspiration of the human agents, may be considered by

evangelical estimation to be found wanting. However, Work suggests that while there are

areas of bibliology where Barth is weak, "he is strong where evangelical theology is

traditionally weak: in his focus on the Holy Spirit's role in illumination."[9]

It is this very focus that is the foundation of Barth's third part of the threefold

Word of God, the proclamation of the Church. So critical is this in Barth's teaching, he

begins his discussion of the Word of God in *Church Dogmatics* with his commentary on

proclamation.[10] Barth affirms this considerable priority of the *kerygma*, "the Word of

God preached means … man's talk about God in which and through which God speaks

about Himself."[11] Therefore, the third form of the Word is to be understood as the

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[7] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* I/1, 109.

[8] Ibid., I/2, 465

[9] Work, *Living and Active*, 93.

[10] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* I/1, 47.

[11] Ibid., I/1, 95.

proclamation and implementation of God's command in the world. How sinful witnesses

can proclaim holy revelation, Barth claims, is like the sacraments. In the Eucharist, the

elements retain their natural form, yet they are appropriated by the Holy Spirit to

communicate grace and fellowship with God. In a similar manner, the human speech of

proclamation is used to communicate grace and fellowship, though the words remain

merely human.[12] Proclamation does not marginalize, nor does it overextend the human

element, rather it establishes the Church as an essential conduit of God's redemptive

Word: "He who hears God's Word is drawn thereby into the sphere of the real power of

this lordship… Preaching does not put it into effect; preaching declares and confirms that

it is in effect. It is proclamation of the Word of God when it proclaims it as something

that is already in effect."[13]

<center>The Word in the World</center>

While the scope of *Church Dogmatics* and his related written works establish

Barth as a daunting theological figure, much of his teaching was drawn from his

understanding of the crisis of culture, along with real-world pastoral issues. Barth viewed

both the Church and the role of the Word in terms of their respective mission to culture:

"Culture is the task set through the Word of God for achieving the destined conditions of

man in unity of soul and body."[14] With this, Barth understands the Word as confron-

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[12] Ibid., I/1, 47.

[13] Ibid., I/1, 153.

[14] Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings, 1920-1928* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 337.

tational to culture. The Church sees mankind as being in sin, and yet the Church always

hopes for mankind, always seeing the promise of Christ for fallen humanity.[15]

Such a distinction became very personal to Barth during the time he was teaching

in Basel and working on *Church Dogmatics*. From 1956 to 1964 Barth would regularly

preach to inmates incarcerated at Basel Prison.[16] In these sermons, Barth would touch

upon humanity's common condition and common brotherhood, exhorting not only the

inmates, but "the countless crowd of those unaware that they themselves are prisoners."[17]

San Francisco Theological Seminary president Arnold Come suggests Barth's assessment

of culture, confronted by the practical issue of preaching to the lost, helped shape much

of his theology. The classic liberalism of his own education "appeared less relevant as he

was confronted each week with the needs of the people on the one hand, and the Bible on

the other. Out of this torment … a new theological era was born."[18]

An Evangelical Estimation of Barth

Among the recent generation of evangelicals, appreciation of Barthian theology

has experienced an increase. Inasmuch as *Church Dogmatics* was written ultimately with

practical ecclesiological issues in mind, those currently participating in the dialog of re-

framing the Church in the twenty-first century are regularly turning to Barth, finding

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[15] Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings*, 343.

[16] Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 41.

[17] Ibid., 43.

[18] Arnold Come, *An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 15.

fresh emphasis on discipleship as a continual turning toward Christ.[19] Hauerwas and

Willimon, in their theological assessment of the Church in culture, conclude that while

the existential theology of Paul Tillich suggests that Christianity must be made more

modern and relevant to modern culture, Barthian thinking predicts that the theological

problem of the next generations would be "the creation of a new and better church."[20]

Barth's picture of such a newly constructed church is not one of institutional hierarchy,

but one deeply rooted in what he calls the "concrete form of the congregation in a

particular place."[21]

Barth shares with much of evangelicalism a high regard for the role of the local

congregation, the power of the Kingdom of God working globally at a very particular and

local level. In this estimation, the Church is drawn together as the Body of Christ less by

creed or priestly office, but by its mandate and mission to represent Christ in the world.

Barth's consideration of the Church's mission has been well received by the evangelicals

in the missional dialog of the last ten years, understanding the Church not as engaging in

missionary activities, but being in its very nature missional.[22] If there is space for

Barthian and evangelical agreement in these areas of ecclesiology and mission, there

remains a significant difference in the two approaches to bibliology and the nature of

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[19] Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 110.

[20] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens Life in the Christian* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 23.

[21] Karl Barth's address to World Council of Church, Amsterdam Assembly Series, *Man's Disorder and God's Design* (New York City: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 67.

[22] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* IV/3, 879.

Scripture. This will be demonstrated in the following assessment of the influence of Carl

Henry.

Carl F. H. Henry: Neo-evangelicalism and Scripture

In the first half of the twentieth century, Karl Barth recognized the failure of the

classic liberalism in which he was schooled to adequately address the issues of faith and

the crisis of fallen humanity. Near the same time, Carl F. H. Henry acknowledged the

inadequacies of American fundamentalism, a movement that had "failed to oppose the

full genius of the Hebrew-Christian outlook to its modern competitors."[23] Post-war

conservative Christianity, in Henry's observation, had neglected its intellectual and social

obligations, and was therefore in danger of being marginalized and made irrelevant. Out

of these convictions, Henry would emerge as a thought-leader and key figure in what

would become modern evangelicalism. His works, specifically his voluminous *God,*

Revelation, and Authority offer significant teachings toward shaping evangelical doctrine.

Henry and Scripture

Much of the emphasis within *God, Revelation, and Authority* is to demonstrate

why belief in the Bible as the infallible revelation of God is reasonable and essential. The

doctrine of inerrancy occupies only one chapter in the massive work, Henry refusing to

make inerrancy a deciding factor for what is considered evangelical. Although,

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[23] Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1947), xvii.

throughout his teaching he does insist that "the Bible is without fault and forms the only true source of evangelical theology."[24]

Within the first pages of *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Henry affirms a strong Protestant claim of Scripture: "The Bible is the reservoir and conduit of divine truth. The Scriptures are the authoritative written record and interpretation of God's revelatory deeds, and the ongoing source of reliable objective knowledge concerning God's nature and ways."[25] Taking up the bulk of his argument for divine revelation in the second volume of *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Henry offers fifteen theses regarding biblical revelation that serve as a foundation for the remainder of the work. [26] These can be grouped loosely into three broader categories, beginning with the epistemological issues of Scripture. Henry maintains that divine revelation consists of rational, intelligible communication in which humankind is allowed to know of God only what he deems knowable: "Revelation is a divinely initiated activity, God's free communication by which he alone turns his personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of his reality."[27] Concurrently, God is under no obligation to reveal anything, therefore "divine revelation does not completely erase God's transcendent mystery, inasmuch as God the Revealer transcends his own revelation."[28] Thus, Henry opposes the Aristotelian notion that a transcendent Thing cannot be known in his "essence."

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[24] G. Wright Doyle, *Carl Henry Theologian for All Seasons: An Introduction and Guide to Carl Henry's God, Revelation, and Authority* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 35.

[25] Carl F. H. Herny, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco: TX, Word Publishing, 1983), 1:13.

[26] Doyle, *Carl Henry Theologian for All Seasons*, 52.

[27] Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 2:24.

[28] Ibid., 2:9.

A second category for Henry's theses on divine revelation falls within the area of Scripture as special revelation. Henry affirms that the revelation of God is "uniquely personal both is content and form."[29] This understanding of personal revelation differs from both pagan and modern notions of metaphysical realities being impersonal and non-propositional in nature.[30] This personal revelation comes to its pinnacle in the person of Jesus, where "the source and content of revelation converge and coincide."[31]

The final category for Henry's bibliological theses deals specifically with Scripture as a conduit for redemptive revelation. As Jesus is the mediating agent of redemption, so the Holy Spirit "enables individuals to appropriate God's revelation savingly," thereby attesting to "the redemptive power of the revealed truth of God in the personal experience of reborn sinners."[32] In response to this, the Church is to carry out the continuing ministry of redemptive revelation as it is to "mirror to each successive generation the power and joy of the appropriated realities of divine revelation."[33] Read in their entirety, Henry's fifteen theses provide a comprehensive doctrine of classic twentieth-century evangelical teaching on the role of Scripture and divine revelation.

A Present Evangelical Appraisal of Henry

In the years following World War II, evangelicalism was experiencing a period of great growth and influence. The culture-shaping institutions of media and education had

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[29] Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 2:151.

[30] Doyle, *Carl Henry Theologian for All Seasons,* 59.

[31] Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 2:11.

[32] Ibid., 2:15.

[33] Ibid.

opened up to an evangelical presence. Carl Henry, the first editor of the evangelical

flagship publication, *Christianity Today*, emerged as a leading voice in what was an

increasing Christian optimism for a new kind of Great Awakening.[34] Along with other

leaders, Henry tempered his hopes for cultural revival with a "hefty dose of realism about

the cultural scene of the mid-twentieth century."[35] With the societal upheaval of the

1960s, Henry's optimism began to fade, and a more hardened, pessimistic view of culture

emerged in his teaching. In 1969, at a convocation address at Eastern Baptist Theological

Seminary in Philadelphia, Henry delivered a pointed message entitled, "The Barbarians

Are Coming," outlining his concern for the impending decline of Western culture.[36] In

similar works of his during this time, Henry reserved his harshest criticisms for the

Church, describing what he understood to be ineptness and irrelevancy in the Church.

     In the years following the completion of *God, Revelation, and Authority* in 1983,

general opinion of Henry has been largely apathetic among evangelicals. For a leader and

thinker with such capable skills in multiple fields, and for a man who taught and wrote

for some of evangelicalism's most influential academic and media institutions, it comes

as a surprise to many familiar with his work the degree to which he is either

misunderstood or ignored.[37] G. Wright Doyle, a theologian and chronicler of Henry's

work, is among those who lament the lack of interest Christians today have in Henry's

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[34] James A. Patterson, "Cultural Pessimism in Modern Evangelical Thought: Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry, and Charles Colson," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 4 (2006): 807.

[35] Ibid., 809.

[36] Ibid., 814.

[37] Henry had earned doctorates in theology and philosophy; he was among the first faculty of Fuller Theological Seminary; he served as *Christianity Today*'s first editor; and made significant contributions to a number of evangelical journals and organizations.

influence: "Henry suffers today from a degree of neglect that is surprising, given his former prominence."[38] Doyle considers part of the reason for the neglect may stem from the perception of pessimism in Henry's teaching. Doyle affirms that Henry's later works do indeed criticize "evangelicalism's empty core," but this was drawn out of Henry's deep-seated hope that meaning and truth would naturally be the product of a Church engaged in intellectually robust dialog.[39] For Henry, it is on the even playing field of ideas and propositional thinking where the Church will triumph.

However, the world has shifted from such an appeal to strong rationality. Today, evangelicals have mixed opinions of Henry as a thought-leader. For many, there remains a dismissive posture. Franke, in describing the evolution away from philosophical foundationalism in theological dialog, characterizes Henry as representing the "wholesale rejection of the new movement" of postliberal thought.[40] Robert Webber is more specific in his assessment when he identifies Herny's "evangelical foundationalism" throughout the fifteen theses of divine revelation in *God, Revelation, and Authority*.[41] Webber claims many of the theses demonstrate "Henry's capitulation to a modern epistemology which elevates reason as an apologetic for Christian truth."[42]

Doyle's contention, that any well-meaning student of theology will find volumes of intellectually stimulating and robust material in Henry, is well founded; yet the cultural

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[38] Doyle, *Carl Henry Theologian for All Seasons,* 15.

[39] Ibid., 89.

[40] Franke, *The Character of Theology*, 34.

[41] Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 97

[42] Ibid.

landscape of the early twenty-first century is such that the strictly propositional and

foundational approaches to biblical authority seem to miss the ethos of the time. It is no

surprise that Webber's "younger evangelicals" are increasingly drawn to Barthian

thought, "away from theology as ruled by reason and the scientific method toward

theology as a reflection of the community on the narrative of Israel and Jesus."[43]

Curiously, an exchange between Henry and C.S. Lewis in 1955 foreshadowed the

beginning of this shift from propositional to narrative theology. At that time, Henry, the

editor of the already widely read *Christianity Today*, had invited Lewis to contribute a

series of articles to the publication.[44] Lewis was a popular figure in the United Kingdom,

as well as the United States, and while not a theologian in the strict sense, very few others

continue to wield such influence in Christian thinking. His seminal work, *Mere*

Christianity, remains one of the most widely read and enduring apologetic works of all

time, framing the claims of Christianity through cumulative evidence with classic

foundational elements. Its content draws largely from Lewis' radio addresses to the

British people during World War II, reassuring them of their moral and rational high

ground in the belief in the God of the Bible.

It was perhaps Lewis' "war time" voice Henry sought to have participate in

Christianity Today, speaking to difficult issues with keen arguments and analysis.

However, Lewis politely declined, explaining that the emphasis on his work had changed:

"My thought and talent (such as they are) now flow in different, though I trust not less

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[43] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 87.

[44] Dan DeWitt, "Why C.S. Lewis Didn't Write for Christianity Today," *Christianity Today*, December (web only) 2012, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/december-web-only/why-cs-lewis-didnt-write-for-christianity-today.html?paging=off, (accessed June 3, 2013).

Christian, channels, and I do not think I am at all likely to write more directly theological pieces."[45] It was true that Lewis' non-academic writings had, at that time, been preoccupied with fictional works such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Til We Have Faces*, devotional materials like *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, and his autobiography *Surprised By Joy*. Lewis had not abandoned Christian thought, but he appeared to view the landscape of theological dialog as veering away from the strong rationalistic approach: "If I am now good for anything it is for catching the reader unawares—thro' fiction and symbol. I have done what I could in the way of frontal attacks, but I now feel quite sure those days are over."[46]

Nearly sixty years after those comments, the Church is beginning to recognize their validity. Henry represents the best of evangelical thinking of an era. His work should be held with highest regard, his heart for evangelism is to be lauded. Nonetheless his methodology remains a product of a different time. For evangelicalism to remain true to its mandate and mission in the world, the singular voice of God that Henry so faithfully regarded may now be more clearly understood through the storied narrative of our communities, and within a process of collaboration and discovery.

Conclusions

Both Barth and Henry were missionaries of a sort: Barth to the liberalism of the German schools, Henry to the fundamentalism of his American environment. Both men saw the need to counter-correct the knee jerk reactions brought on by the triumph of

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[45] DeWitt, "Why C.S. Lewis Didn't Write for Christianity Today."

[46] Ibid.

scientific rationalism in the early twentieth century. To their credit, both men remained active in their respective environments, all the while remaining voices of challenge and counteraction within them. A century later the Church is once again in the midst of significant culture change brought on by technological and social catalysts. Among the lessons to be learned by these two great thinkers, a central lesson must certainly be a fearlessness of calling and conviction. As today's Christian leaders call the Church to engage with their world through the Word of God, a keen vision and passionate sincerity to engage in biblical dialog will be required. In the final part of this paper a strategy for ministry among those in the new media landscape will be offered, seeking paradigms for scriptural transformation shaped by the historic Church, expressing the uniqueness of each local congregation, and echoing Webber's charge of being "conscious in our action in and to the world of the new cultural situation in which we live, taking into consideration the new realities of the twenty-first century."[47]

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[47] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 243.

PART THREE: MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 6

NEW WINESKINS FOR A DIGITAL AGE

> Every generation of Christians has this problem of learning how to speak
> meaningfully to its own age.
> —Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*

The Church exists in the steady stream of culture, and while there remain various

theologies of how we engage culture, one task of leadership in the Church is to anticipate

the flow of that stream. Our present state of fluidity, as church leadership authors Michael

Frost and Alan Hirsch suggest, "is a marginal thing. It could go either way. Much will

depend on how the now well established forms of the Church and Christianity respond."[1]

The contention of this paper is that a failure to examine and understand how the forces of

new media and digital technologies are changing how we perceive knowledge and

discern truth will result in an increasingly distant and muffled voice of the Church.

Historically, the relationship between the Church and the co-opting of technology

has been conflicted. Philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul maintains that the

centuries marking the height of Christendom in the West, from the fourth to the

fourteenth century, are regarded as the least technologically relevant era of Western

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[1] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 223.

civilization.[2] Rather than the dominant presence of Rome leveraging its vast resources "as a gift given by God to be put to good use," those centuries instead are characterized "by a total absence of technical will. It was a-capitalistic as well as a-technical."[3] Minimal effort in the Middle Ages was spent toward advancing the principal vocations of agriculture, industry, and military. Ellul considers two causes of this from the position of the Church's dominance: The ethical impulse to denounce luxury and worldliness, and the theological conviction that the world was nearing its end, making it futile to further societal progress.[4]

By contrast, the modern era brought a near blind acceptance of new technologies that were indeed seen as "a gift given by God to be put to good use." The early use of television in the 1930s spawned a fervent hope among some Christian leaders that the Word of God would finally triumph globally. "Preaching is doomed," declared Dr. Bernard Chancellor Clausen to the Northern Baptist Convention in 1933, "We little, unimportant preachers may retire from the field with disgruntled resentment, or we may be a part of a joyous acceptance of this new tool which science has placed in our hands for the winning of the world."[5] While Clausen's prediction may have fallen short, his earnestness for a media-driven gospel delivery system has certainly captured the interest of many in the Church, up to and including the Internet era.

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[2] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Random House, 1964), 34.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 37.

[5] *Time Magazine*, "Religion: Future of Preaching," Time Magazine archives, June 5, 1933, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,745632,00.html (accessed June 24, 2013).

Herein lies evangelicalism's somewhat strained relationship with technology and new media. At times the Church withdraws, shunning the allure of new tools as somehow corrupting a pure message. Other times emerging media are seized upon, enlisted into ministry without qualification. What is found lacking in each of these postures is a reflective theology of message and mission. Speaking a generation ago to the potential hazards of television culture, media authority and practicing Catholic Malcolm Muggeridge offered a tempered view of technology, inviting believers to seek past the medium and find the Message: "We have to thank God even for the media, which so convincingly and insistently demonstrate their own fantasy…. Above all, we have to thank him for the Incarnation … that almighty Word was the medium, and the message was Christ."[6]

This chapter returns to the current digital media phenomenon discussed earlier in an effort to present renewed reflection of healthy expressions in Christian teaching and spiritual formation. Having established the ministry challenge of the present cultural context, and assessed the theological issues of biblical authority and proclamation, this chapter seeks to challenge conventional ministry paradigms, offering a new framework for advancing the Word of God in the midst of digital culture.

McChurch: Multisite Congregations

One current trend in the evangelical church provides an example for the need for theological reflection with the adoption of technological solutions. In the last five years, multisite churches, congregations that identify themselves as one church in more than one

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[6] Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1977), 59.

location, have experienced exponential growth with presently over five thousand multisite congregations in the United States.[7] While different models exist for the multisite church, the majority adopts a video-venue model in which one teaching presentation is fed (either live or pre-recorded) to the church's various venues via visual media.[8] The benefits of this model are that it allows for churches to "extend their reach by creating a variety of environments, often driven by worship style, that attract different segments of their communities."[9] Proponents of the video venue argue that church attendees are savvy digital users who are accustomed to receiving messages through visual media, and the impact of God's Word "isn't limited by the medium."[10]

However, this approach may be embraced more for reasons of consumption or convenience rather than through intentional and biblical reflection. While it can be argued that God's Word is not limited by media, Church leaders who recognize the imprint various media make on the Church's message may find subtleties to the video-venue that are often overlooked. Missiologist Ed Stezer identifies the lack of leader development as a key limitation of the video-driven church teaching ministry: "Without intentionality, [the video-venue model] will limit reproduction. Let's face it, it's easier to create another extension site than it is to create another faithful pastor who is a great

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[7] Warren Bird, "Multisite Is Multiplying: New Developments in the Movement's Expansion," Leadership Network Learnings Blog, http://leadnet.org//blog/post/multisite_is_multiplying_new_developments_in_the_movements_expansion (accessed October 17, 2013).

[8] Warren Bird, Greg Ligon, and Geoff Surratt, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 2006), 30.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 93.

communicator."[11] Video-venue churches, whether explicitly or implicitly, offer a vision for biblical teaching and authority that promotes the individual communicator above the community of the Word.

The Highway Community in Palo Alto has exited as a multisite church for the last six years, but their expansion into neighboring Mountain View was through a teaching team model. "For us it's all about leadership," Smith says, "we weren't interested in adding an additional site until we had the right team in place."[12] As one of the first churches in the nation to house their own visual media company, the move toward video-driven venues may have seemed to be the likely one, but Smith and his team are committed to the development and deployment of their staff and congregation: "There is a lot of unused Christian capital sitting in many churches."[13] Such commitment values the mission above the tools, and advances the gospel not through consumption, but through contribution.

How Media Shapes Message

New technologies that are widely embraced, suggests media theorist Neil Postman, usually are linked to unforeseen consequences, "and it is not always clear, at the beginning, who or what will win, and who or what will lose."[14] Coinciding with the birth of the Christian Church in the first century, a new medium for storing and sharing

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[11] Ed Stetzer, "Questions for McChurch," *Outreach*, June 2008, 25.

[12] Dean Smith, interview with the author, Mountain View, CA, October 14, 2013.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Neil Postman, "Informing Ourselves to Death," German Informatics Society, http://w2.eff.org/Net_culture/Criticisms/informing_ourselves_to_death.paper (accessed June 10, 2013).

information was born, the bound codex. Though it would take a few centuries to replace

scrolls as the favored medium, codices offered users similar benefits to present-day

laptops: durability, portability, and more storage in less space. These were clear

advantages of a codex over a scroll, yet there was an unexpected effect of the adoption of

the new medium. Prior to the codex, each portion of Scripture (in particular, the New

Testament books) was a separate and distinct contribution to what would become the

canon. As copyists began to bind letters and Gospels together, a new category was

evolving that would shape how Scripture would be viewed. The *biblos*, meaning paper or

papyrus, became the *biblia*, the book or The Book.[15]

Some scholars believe Constantine, in the early fourth century, commissioned a

number of codices containing the collected works of the New Testament as a means to

reinforce the newly formed Christian canon. *Codex Sinaiticus*, one of the oldest and most

complete extant copies of the New Testament, is thought to be one of these. With

Scripture now literally codified, the result was, "a major paradigm shift in how Christians

… thought about their 'Bible' and its canonical cohesiveness."[16] Prior to the institution

of the codex, the New Testament writings were, "less fixed, and perceptions, accordingly,

less concrete."[17] Once it became normative to expect "the Bible" between two covers, the

notion of the canon of Scripture became established in a way that has shaped thinking

through the present. Issues of biblical authority may be considered differently when one

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[15] Robert Kraft, "The Codex and Canon Consciousness," (draft, University of Pennsylvania, October 10, 2000): http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/gopher/other/journals/kraftpub/Christianity/Canon (accessed June 10, 2013).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Robert Kraft, "The Codex and Canon Consciousness."

considers a bound volume as opposed to a collection of papers. There is an implied

metanarrative and superstructure to the elements of a complete, codified Bible. An "all-

for-one" sense of Scripture emerges that elevates or denigrates the entirety of the Bible

based on the perceived strength or weakness of a portion.

Two millennia later, Christians would adopt new technologies for reading

Scripture, replacing the codex and returning in some ways to the Church's earliest

encounters with the written word: one uses "tablet" devices to access digital Bibles

whereby one "scrolls" down the pages to the desired passage. Use of this technology is

still in its infancy, but the digital experience of Scripture is certainly influencing how the

Bible is understood in the twenty-first century. John Piper expresses the obvious danger

of distraction: "If you are reading your Bible on your computer or your smartphone or

your iPad, the presence of the email app and the news apps and the Facebook app

threaten every moment to drag your attention away from the word of God."[18] However,

there remain more nuanced shifts in the experience of Scripture through digital media.

Wheaton College English professor Alan Jacobs is concerned about the fragmentation of

the Word of God through digital means. Jacobs contends that the cell phone app, the

Kindle browser, or the PowerPoint slide "severs its chosen verse or two from its textual

surroundings [and] occludes any sense of sequence within the whole of the Bible."[19]

Whether or not these observations expose actual concerns may be too early to tell, but

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[18] John Piper, "Beware: The Bible Is About to Threaten Your Smartphone Focus," Desiring God Blog, http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/beware-the-bible-is-about-to-threaten-your-smartphone-focus (accessed June 10, 2013).

[19] Alan Jacobs, "Christianity and the Future of the Book," *The New Atlantis* (Fall 2011): 34.

what is clear is that Scripture is being loosed from its nearly two thousand year old

bibliographic moorings as the medium of the Bible experiences significant change.

From Searching to Seeking

Google revealed that as of June 2012 there are over 425 million active Gmail

accounts.[20] Undoubtedly, the number of Google search users would be considerably

higher than this figure, meaning that "the world's information" is accessible to countless

hundreds of millions of people. As noted in Chapter 2, the history of Internet search

reveals that knowledge inquiry online is getting faster, more specific, and more

personalized. 95 percent of website traffic resulting from user search is driven from the

first pages of search results, indicating that not only is Google getting more efficient at

relaying relevant information, users are becoming more adept connoisseurs of

knowledge.[21] It may be understandable for the Church to respond to this phenomenon

with a push toward renewed relevance. The last twenty years of church resources, both

from traditional and digital media outlets, stress the "sink or swim" mentality of bringing

cultural relevance to the church experience.[22] The result of relevance-driven ministry

becomes a laborious game of keeping up with culture, maintaining an edge, and

constantly looking for the next "big thing" to offer one's worshippers.

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[20] Dante D'Orazio, "Gmail Now Has 425 Million Active Users," The Verge, http://www.theverge.com/2012/6/28/3123643/gmail-425-million-total-users (accessed June 11, 2013).

[21] Helen Legatt, "95% of Traffic Comes from First Page of Search Results," BizReport. http://www.bizreport.com/2010/02/95_of_traffic_comes_from_first_page_of_search_results.html (accessed June 13, 2013).

[22] Leonard Sweet's influential 1999 book and resources, *SoulTsunami*, uses the "sink or swim" tagline in the subtitle.

There is certainly a mandate from Scripture to present the gospel in accessible and relevant ways. Paul affirms, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some," (1 Cor 9:22). There is a degree to which healthy Christian communities recognize the signs and signals of their culture, and adjust ministry paradigms accordingly. Nonetheless, a stronger response to the ubiquitous presence of Google may actually be to combat some of the practices and influences associated with the culture of digital search. This begins with confronting consumption over exploration. If the consumer mentality, in which 95 percent of users regard only the first page of results, is applied to spiritual inquiry, it is likely that churches then are gatherings of impatient end users as much as spiritual seekers.

The late Dallas Willard, in an interview with John Ortberg at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, suggested Christians turn the search back on the seeker: "One of the things I will often ask a person who I sense to be sincere is, 'Would you like for there to be a God? And what kind of God would you like for there to be?' That is the first step."[23] The "filter bubble" effect discussed earlier leverages signals from the user's online presence, and generates search results based on these signals. The resulting effect is one in which genuine exploration is curtailed, not encouraged. The Church has an opportunity to connect the gospel within a tension of unresolved inquiry and unanswered questions. This is not to abandon truth to some postmodern outpost, but it is a challenge to the traditional, foundational apologetic and *kerygma* with which evangelicalism is historically associated. Grenz and Franke suggest what they call a "conversational

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[23] Dallas Willard, interview by John Ortberg, December 12, 2009, interview transcript, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, Menlo Park, CA.

theology" that affirms the Bible as the starting point, tradition as an "indispensable source for theology," and culture as "the embedding context for theological talk."[24] In such conversation, the notion of relevant search takes on significantly greater weight. Venues for pursuing biblical dialog in this manner will be discussed in the following chapter.

From High Church to Flat Church

In 2000, Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger were frustrated with the slow growth of Nupedia, their original and conventional online encyclopedia. After one year, only twenty-one articles had been reviewed and posted by the Nupedia reviewers.[25] Wikipedia was launched as an effort to feed articles into the Nupedia editorial process, but by 2003 it was clear that the "free encyclopedia anyone can edit" was going to outshine and outlast its predecessor. While Wales championed Wikipedia's process of collaboration, consensus, and open editorial practices, Sanger wanted to maintain content control. Sanger went on to start Citizendium, a wiki-based encyclopedia that invited open participation, but each article was to be expertly reviewed and edited. Citizendium has since struggled to maintain a presence, becoming in essence the other free encyclopedia anyone can edit, but very few did.

Control of content is a familiar struggle in the Church. From Jesus' disciples chastising competing exorcists, to the Arian and Gnostic controversies of the early centuries, to the Great Schism, to the Reformation, battles over who has the final say in the Church are inescapable. Unquestionably, many of these were battles worth waging,

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[24] Grenz and Franke, Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 24.

[25] Reagle, *Good Faith Collaboration*, 43. By comparison, Wikipedia published eighteen thousand articles in its first year.

and yet the outcome appears to be a notion that content is something to be carefully guarded by the few. The expert class remains firmly established in evangelical congregations among teachers, pastors, scholars, and denominational leaders. The average young Christians, desiring to attach themselves to a spiritual community, will likely choose a church where they can "be fed" by a capable and inspirational teacher on Sunday mornings. Maybe an additional class or small group led by another teacher among the congregation will round out their Christian formation. However, missing in this very commonplace scenario is the obligation of the local body to use the gifts of each member to encourage and build up one another (Eph 4:11-12). Also seemingly missing is the active ministry of the Holy Spirit. Calvin understood the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit to be critical to his doctrine of faith: "The simple and external demonstration of the word of God ought, indeed, to suffice fully for the production of faith, did not our blindness and perversity interfere.… Hence, without the illumination of the Holy Spirit the word has no effect."[26] This, of course, merely echoes one of the final instructions of Jesus before his crucifixion: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth," (Jn 16:13). Thus again, it is the theology of the Triune God that must inform our ecclesiology rather than the inverse.

Generation X, at times labeled as disengaged, has been on the leading edge of active engagement in the digital era[27]. The Millennials who followed are natives of the participatory environment of Web 2.0. Ed Caesar of *The Independent* captures this ethos:

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[26] John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge, (London: Bonham Norton, 1599) III.2.xxxiii, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/institutes/institutes.html (accessed June 15, 2013).

[27] Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 5.

"For a generation of kids and hipsters … their only imperative is record, upload, and share and blog and contribute."[28] One of the biggest disconnects facing the Church in the current environment is this issue of content creation and flatter authority structures. This is not a casual endeavor to the church with a mandate to "rightly divide the word of truth," and to "entrust to faithful men and women" the ministry of teaching the word, yet the top-down hierarchical mechanism of proclamation can no longer be assumed as the most effective means. Evangelicals who embrace a high value of community learning, discoverable truth, and flatter leadership will find a receptive congregation among the digital natives.

This is not to abandon the importance of the educated expert. On the contrary, the learned voice is one that is currently enjoying a resurgence of admiration. Scott Scruggs affirms this: "People aren't opposed to learning from experts. The TED concept has proven that people love to listen to experts."[29] Indeed, TED has become so successful, there is currently a TED channel just for children—the demographic least likely to sit and listen to a monologue. The climate of learning today encourages an appreciation of a consortium of authoritative voices, but it is the technology of today that allows leaders to deploy those voices. The opportunity for the Church in proclaiming and contextualizing the Word of God may be to help people "filter these voices," suggests Scruggs, "and to get unified and passionate about that."[30] As seen in the Wikipedia/*Encyclopedia*

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[28] Ed Caesar, "Don't Just Watch, Blog!" *The Independent on Sunday (London, England)*, December 31, 2006, http://www.questia.com/read/1P2-3698162 (accessed June 15, 2013).

[29] Scruggs, interview. TED refers to a popular series of Technology Entertainment and Design presentations begun in Silicon Valley in 1984.

[30] Scruggs, interview.

Britannica comparison, there will always need to be an appeal to an authoritative source and qualified experts. The flatter church has the opportunity to encourage broad participation, communal construction of understanding, and a deployment of a multitude of truth sources.

From Listening to Participating

In June 2013, actress Katee Sackhoff tweeted her response to an accidental shooting in which a father was killed by his young child: "Please practice gun safety. This is horrible!"[31] The almost immediate response was overwhelmingly negative. Perceived as being supportive of firearm use, Sackoff lost half of her 200,000 Twitter followers in one day.[32] Despite follow-up tweets clarifying her position, Sackhoff was ostracized in the Twitter community, not for being pro-gun, but seemingly for not being anti-gun enough. While Google reframes how we search, and Wikipedia how we learn, Twitter, along with the swelling pantheon of other social media outlets, presents the most intimate challenge, because it reframes how we perceive others and ourselves.

As noted in Chapter 2, social media, which originated as a semi-public platform to share one's thoughts or behaviors at any given time, has evolved an experience-framing mechanism, becoming a generative cause of events in one's life as much as a record of them. Twitter continues its exponential growth, with over 400 million tweets per day, and the implications of social media users crafting their personal brand and

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[31] "Actress Katee Sackoff Urges Gun Safety on Twitter Loses Half Her Followers," Fox News, http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2013/06/11/actress-katee-sackoff-urges-gun-safety-on-twitter-loses-half-her-followers/ (accessed June 14, 2013).

[32] Ibid.

contributing to the branding of others are significant.[33] As Ms. Sackhoff experienced, the notion of "followers" on Twitter is fleeting. For every tweet, YouTube video, and Facebook status, there is a reply or comment feature, inviting real-time opinions of relative strangers with an artificial access into the lives of the Twitter user. Such artificiality goes both ways as users can adopt a false sense of community and intimacy with their followers. In a recent study of celebrity/fan relationships on Twitter, it was determined that celebrities "use Twitter to communicate information about their personal likes and dislikes, conveying information that revealed things that are not typically shared in other forums."[34] In brief pithy bursts of information, Twitter fosters such perceived intimacy.

Social media taps into a fundamental need of humans to connect, belong, and generate community. Technology allows such connections to be made practically instantly, and with minimal effort. Clay Shirky observes, "with a billion people online and more on the way, it's easy and cheap to get the attention of a million people or … to help those people get one another's attention."[35] However, biblically healthy community is never "easy and cheap;" the challenge to the Church has always been to present a healthier version of community than the substitutes readily available in the world.

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[33] Hayley Tsukayama, "Twitter Turns 7: Users Send over 400 million Tweets per Day," *Washington Post Online*, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-03-21/business/37889387_1_tweets-jack-dorsey-twitter (accessed June 14, 2013).

[34] Gayle S. Stever and Kevin Lawson, "Twitter as a Way for Celebrities to Communicate with Fans: Implications for the Study of Parasocial Interaction," *North American Journal of Psychology* 15, no. 2 (2013): 339.

[35] Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, 102.

This is not to suggest social media does not have a role in healthy community. In fact, the digital generation is finding authentic expressions of connection through social media. Biola University psychology professor Todd Hall has done extensive research on the spiritual lives of young adults, and finds that there is recent evidence that spiritual formation is happening "more in community without relying on the institutional church to organize [it]. But these community networks are more often decentralized with the advent of social media, and the decline of civic groups."[36] Recognizing the frailty and limitations of inadequate versions of relational connection, and providing authentic networks of spiritual community in and out of the Church remains a key challenge of this present generation of evangelicals.

Additionally, the unparalleled acceptance of Twitter and social media presents another open door for the Church. When the digital generation comes to church, they come as contributors, as participants who are not satisfied to simply download information; they come as uploaders. Embracing participation and discovery in its efforts to present and engage the congregation with Scripture is a crucial practice for the Church striving to reframe the gospel for the current generation. The landscape of new media and the societal changes in learning and collaboration open up doors through which the evangelical church may rediscover Paul's assertion of a "manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" given to each person (1 Cor 12:7). In this environment, spiritual conversation need not lead participants to a didactic conclusion at which the "correct" answer or hermeneutic is arrived, rather the conversation and participation itself is what is valued. To contribute to such a conversation is to experience a faith that is not an

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[36] Todd Hall, email interview with author, Whittier, CA, August 11, 2011.

unyielding list of creeds, but a fluid and active stream of tradition that rewards robust interaction. In the final part of this paper, a strategy for moving forward with these ministry challenges and reframed paradigms will be offered. New models for preaching, spiritual formation, and leadership structures will be explored for the local church striving to make disciples in the digital environment.

CHAPTER 7

REFRAMING BIBLICAL DIALOG IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Content is not the power. Community is.
—James Twitchell, *Shopping for God*

According to a 2013 study by the Barna Research group, 66 percent of American

adults indicate a belief that "the Bible contains everything a person needs to live a

meaningful life."[1] While this appears to be a high number of positive responses, it is

telling that this represents a 9 percent drop from the same study done only two years

prior. Any number of factors may contribute to this trend, including the cultural and

technologically-driven shifts explored in this paper. However, what remains at issue is

the need for local congregations and Christian leaders to frame biblical dialog in such a

way as to address these trends, inviting engagement with Scripture as a robust and

transformative practice in the life of the seeker and follower of Jesus. Sadly, high regard

for such dialog is lacking in many congregations, and as Wright indicates, "most

churches, even those with well-developed educational programs, have a long way to go in

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[1] Barna Research Group, "What Do Americans Really Think About the Bible?" Barna.org, March 27, 2013, http://www.barna.org/culture-articles/609-what-do-americans-really-think-about-the-bible?q=bible (accessed June 19, 2013).

their teaching of Scripture."[2] Evangelicalism, a movement with some affinity for "educational programs," clearly has challenges as it is losing influence in America, especially among younger adults. "Disdain for evangelicals among the younger set is overwhelming and definitive," according to Barna Group president David Kinnaman.[3] This loss of voice and influence appears to be especially true with regard to the regional focus of this paper, Silicon Valley. While such data is difficult to quantify, the low number of churches per people in the region fuels that assumption.[4]

This chapter offers a strategic approach to reframing biblical dialog for the digital generation who are increasingly becoming distanced from the influence of Scripture. With consideration given to the cultural and theological shifts studied above, a strategy will be offered in three areas of biblical dialog for the Silicon Valley congregation: the proclamation of the Word, spiritual formation and discipleship, and authority structures within the local church. Particular endeavors through my own ministry in Redwood City will be examined as part of the present discussion.

Scripture in Story: Discovery-driven Preaching

The act of biblical proclamation, specifically the pulpit-delivered homily, might be considered the antithesis of the postmodern experiment. The sermon posits truth as an objective idea, not a human construct; it represents a singular grand narrative, not an

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[2] Wright, *The Last Word*, 139.

[3] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 25.

[4] According to Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties ranked among the bottom twenty counties in the U.S. in 2010 for churches per capita. Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, "2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study," http://rcms2010.org/compare.php, (accessed May 23, 2013).

individual experience. "For the biblical expositor as well as the home Bible study leader, this raises unique problems in how to communicate God's message," according to Australian pastor and Christian educator Graham Johnston.[5] Adding to the philosophical disconnect, the social realities of the present time tend to trivialize the preacher. With the world's information literally at one's fingertips, the half-hour monologue offers little in the way of compelling delivery and original content. Further, when one considers the visually-driven media culture, the participatory environment of social media, and collaborative experience of most digital natives, the role of biblical proclamation faces what Webber calls the "inevitable problem … of communicating truth in human garb without accommodating it to the garb through which it is being presented."[6]

Where Proclamation Begins

In contrast to this conflict is the transformative power of the gospel, and the mandate of the preacher of the gospel to "be ready in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2). Christian proclamation is in no danger of becoming irrelevant or unnecessary, but Christian teachers do have a duty to recognize the learning and communication forms of their times. In the case of the present climate, this begins with evaluating foundational belief systems, and experimenting with non-propositional and discovery-driven teaching. As discussed earlier, this is not to abandon singular truth claims, but rather to hold the

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[5] Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 9.

[6] Webber, *Ancient Future Faith*, 197.

process of truth discovery in such a way as to allow tension and a measure of what postfoundationalist van Huyssteen describes as "non-explanation."[7]

This discussion returns to the identity and role of Scripture in the evangelical community as the starting point for reframing biblical preaching. New Testament scholar J. Daniel Kirk suggests, "How we preach is inseparable from what we think the Bible is and what, then, we're supposed to do with it."[8] The starting point of discovery-based preaching is framing the Bible itself as the written Word of God extending from Christ, the incarnate Word of God. Here one must return to the Church's formative theology, echoing Athanasius' Christological context for Scripture. It is through the living *logos* that the words of Scripture extend beyond the finite and become transcendent. From a conventional propositional approach, the Bible points to and explains the Person of Christ. Reversing this dialectical flow does not minimize or marginalize Scripture, but allows Christ to inform the pages of the Bible: the good news is good only because Jesus is good; it is living and active only because of the resurrected and living Savior. Arguably, the varied theological movements highlighted in Chapters 4 and 5 continue this theme, namely that healthy and transformative biblical dialog begins with a high Christology. Whether Christian teachers stand in the pulpit or sit in the living room, opening the pages of Scripture should be an invitation to discover and re-discover a relationship with the incarnate Word, and allow this starting point to inform proclamation.

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[7] van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 183.

[8] J. Daniel Kirk, "Narrative Preaching," Storied Theology Blog, May 23, 2012, http://www.jrdkirk.com/2012/05/23/narrative-preaching/ (accessed June 19, 2013).

New Practices from the Pulpit

The practice of discovery-based preaching must begin in the sermon preparation process. As knowledge construction and the experience of content creation is becoming increasingly collaborative and democratized, homiletic practices would benefit from a collaborative approach. Gaddini embraces this approach, leveraging the collected insight and experience of his staff through a weekly sermon round table: "Every week for the last ten years, I—or whomever is preaching—meet as a group of six or seven to read through the passage, go over the outline, and volley back and forth the key ideas."[9] While some preachers may find it threatening to invite open dialog from the staff or lay leadership into sermon preparation, Gaddini "couldn't imagine going into the pulpit without that process."[10] By offering more than exegetical or stylistic correction, the open-handed teaching environment invites the stories and experiences of others to contribute to the message, therefore, even if it is only one person proclaiming the Word, the congregation is engaging with the stories of many.

For some evangelical leaders, the response to shifting cultural sensitivities with regard to biblical proclamation lies in the past, not the future. Borrowing from mainline worship traditions, the lectionary calendar allows for the engagement with Scripture from both the pulpit and the pew in a manner that is participatory and unifying. Travis Reed, one of the founders of Highway Media who later went on to start his own media production company, The Work of the People, was a pioneer in the adoption of

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[9] Gaddini, interview.

[10] Ibid.

traditional liturgies and lectionary resources utilizing digital media. Reed explains the

origin and impact of these worship forms:

> I didn't grow up in church and hadn't been exposed to the weekly rhythm of reading the Word in community until I landed at Ecclesia. When you experience the reading of Scripture in a non-religious way that connects our community's story to the Church's story and together to The Story, it's a very provoking, inspiring, transforming, and mysterious thing. From that experience I started creating visual liturgy specifically inspired by and shaped by the events of the Church calendar and scriptural texts of the Revised Common Lectionary—from the written word to the moving word.[11]

Employing the use of written, verbal, or visual lectionaries, congregations are expectant

and prepared when they receive the proclamation on Sunday. While one individual or a

team is doing the primary preaching, the entire local body becomes part of the "rhythm of

reading the Word" and enters the Story of the Word.

It is this storied or narrative value of preaching that truly marks the discovery

model. Narrative or postliberal theology in the technical sense may extend into

nonfoundational notions of the Bible not readily embraced by evangelical thinking;

however, narrative preaching in a more general sense approaches the Word in such a way

as to place a high value on the Christological arc. Webber cites narrative teaching as an

identifying practice of the group he refers to as "the younger evangelicals."[12] Starting

with the story of redemption and the cross, the emphasis is not on "information but

entering into the biblical story and becoming an extension of the narrative."[13] The

application or "takeaway" may not be the focus, but rather the present story of the

speaker and listeners is seen as an extension of the larger Story of God where Kingdom

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[11] Scott McClellan, "Producer Spotlight: The Work of the People," *Collide*, January 8, 2008, 22.

[12] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 166.

[13] Ibid.

practices are held and sought after. This is not a homiletical style as with, say, a topical or exegetical sermon, but rather it is a lens through which the teacher views the Word and the listeners of the Word. Story in biblical proclamation finds its ultimate application in obedience, and discovery of the joy of obedience. As Kirk affirms, "Narrative preaching is hammering on the story to such an extent that we actually begin to hear the story of The Crucified as our own, and thus, in hearing it, to know that it shapes our identity—including what it means to act faithfully as followers of Jesus."[14]

Spiritual Formation and Collaboration: Community-shaped Discipleship

The proclamation of the Word in corporate worship remains a critical component in the life of the Christian, and yet is only a starting or gathering point in discipleship. Contemporary models of Christian practice that emphasize participation (or perhaps merely attendance) in a well-choreographed worship service simply feed into the consumer mentality of popular culture. Jethani cautions against this trend, denouncing churches that "believe God changes lives through the commodification and consumption of experiences."[15] Conversely, missional models with dominant emphasis on service and social justice, while noble expressions of the Kingdom, can lead to an outward life of faith that neglects the inward hunger of the soul. Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Palo Alto pastor Alex van Riesen recognizes these trends in his ministry context. While Vineyard congregations historically are drawn to expressive elements in worship, van Riesen, a veteran of collegiate ministry through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, sees

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[14] Kirk, "Narrative Preaching."

[15] Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Books, 2009), 75.

the Silicon Valley seeker and worshiper as yearning for substantive engagement with God: "Worship and mission can often miss the deeper experience of the Word."[16] How the churches of the Bay Area and beyond connect these deeper yearnings with a relevant and lasting discipleship process may be an even more important challenge than the public proclamation of Scripture.

Beyond Small Groups

In 2007, after years of drawing data from their own congregation and affiliated churches, Willow Creek Church published findings of their members' spiritual growth and connection in a study aptly called *Reveal*.[17] Parts of the findings of this study suggest strongly that church programs and activity have little impact on the spiritual formation of the attendee. Among the conclusions drawn from *Reveal*, a central prescription emerged challenging church leaders to reduce programming and begin developing a process to encourage the growth of the "self-feeding disciple."[18] This designation, in essence, refers to the pro-active follower of Jesus who takes on the responsibility for his or her own spiritual growth through engaging in "self-feeding" spiritual practices, such as Bible study, prayer, mission, and outreach. The role of the church would shift from central campus and activity hub, to sending and equipping station, encouraging and resourcing the disciple from behind.

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[16] Alex van Riesen, interview with the author, Palo Alto, CA, June 13, 2013.

[17] Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Chicago: Willow Creek Association, 2007).

[18] Ibid., 21.

As a Willow Creek Association church, my own congregation of Sequoia Christian Church in Redwood City took great interest in the *Reveal* study. A survey of our own small group ministry participants uncovered similar results as Willow Creek, namely that individuals reported very little formation or personal change regardless of how long they had been connected to a small group. Not generally a program-heavy congregation, Sequoia leadership resonated with the "self-feeding" disciple concept. Initially, our efforts led toward challenging the individual to take up the practices mentioned above, offering the church as a resource for the individual's journey, and celebrating the stories of God's work in the lives of these individuals. However, it became quickly apparent that the "self-feeding" concept was not intended to be disconnected form the larger community of the church. On the contrary, discipleship is intended to be practiced in community, therefore we needed to re-evaluate our present community expressions while still advancing individual formation.

Providing this context, the church leadership asked all the small groups to go on hiatus while we explored new means of pursuing our purpose to make "fully devoted followers of Jesus." It should be noted that in keeping with the Silicon Valley cultural values discussed in Chapter 1, our congregation responds well to ideation, start-up culture, and even failure. The leadership felt we had the confidence of the church to explore new ways and establish a new process of building up disciples.

One product of this experiment became what we call "Discover Community" groups. These are gatherings of eight to sixteen people meeting in homes, but with a number of differences from our earlier home-based small groups. These groups met for a specific season and duration, with most groups meeting four times for dinner over the

course of two months. There were no teachers in the groups because these were not designed as study-based groups, but dialog-based. In one round of "Discover Community," we utilized a documentary film, *After the Storm* (2009), as a conduit for discussion. The documentary itself concerns themes of community, diversity, adversity, and transformation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. "Discover Community" groups require a facilitator skilled at initiating discussion, fielding questions, and drawing out conversation, but they do not require an "expert" or teacher in the conventional sense. After the season, the groups close and the participants are redistributed for the next season. "Discover Community" groups yield healthy results in that they foster community-based relationships and they allow for meaningful discussion regardless of faith maturity or church involvement. However, it was recognized that they only begin to address central issues of discipleship, and "deeper experiences of the Word" are still desired.

Holy Spirit Hermeneutic

Early in 2013, I launched a new experiment through Sequoia Church to promote a decidedly community-shaped discipleship process. The emphasis on this one, however, was to be distinctively Word-based, yet it was also to leverage the ethos of collaboration and community hermeneutic. The launch of this group was promoted to a potential pool of a couple dozen men in the church as sharing elements of a small group, a Bible study, and an accountability group. It was made clear that the group required an active participation, and that while I would facilitate dialog, there was to be no teacher. If the group was to expect truth and conviction to come from the study of Scripture, it would

come through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This group came to be known as "412,"

a reference to the promises of Hebrews 4:12: "For the word of God is living and active,

sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints

and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

As noted in Chapter 5, while Karl Barth tends to hold a grammatico-historical

approach less robustly than traditional evangelicalism, his emphasis on the Holy Spirit's

role in illuminating Scripture is "strong where evangelical theology is traditionally

weak."[19] Barth does not dismiss historical and critical study, but as he affirms in his

preface to *The Epistle to the Romans*, "were I driven to choose between it and the

venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a

broader, deeper, more important justification."[20]

It was on this expectation of the work of the Holy Spirit that the "412" group was

based. From my initial promotion, six men responded to the invitation, ranging in ages

from early twenties to early fifties, and ranging significantly in spiritual maturity and

experience with the Bible. It was decided to use the Gospel of Mark as the basis for the

group, in part because of its hurried narrative and raw portrait of Jesus it presents. In

musician Nick Cave's estimation, "Mark's Gospel is a clatter of bones, so raw, nervy and

lean on information that the narrative aches with the melancholy of absence. Scenes of

deep tragedy are treated with such a matter-of-factness and raw economy they become

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[19] Work, *Living and Active*, 93.

[20] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 1. It should be noted that Barth's use of the word "inspiration" is more in keeping with the current usage of what is called illumination, the work of the Holy Spirit whereby he enables the believer to understand and receive God's Word into one's life.

almost palpable in their unprotected sorrowfulness."[21] Such a tone offered a good starting

point for a discussion of this nature.

The format of the group was intended to be dialog and discovery-based. Having

made it clear from the start that my role was not one of teacher, but facilitator, we

committed to allow the Gospel of Mark to speak through the group and to the group,

trusting in the work of illumination. To foster this, I developed a series of questions that

were to be used as the basis of group discussion. Prior to meeting each week, the group

would read a chapter in Mark multiple times, thinking about the following questions, then

in the group discussion participants would share their impressions and comment on

others':

> What do I/don't I like about this passage?
> What don't I understand?
> What was the writer's purpose?
> What is this saying about God?
> What is it saying about me?
> What do I want to think more on, or discover more about?

The questions were designed to invite a mix of subjective and objective

discovery, encouraging hermeneutical inquiry that valued the context and theology of the

passage, while also allowing for personal experience and story to inform the discussion.

At times, it was difficult to limit my role and allow conversation to occur without

offering teaching or correction, but eventually the group embraced the community-driven

discussion. One participant, "Brian," an attorney with a mainline denominational

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[21] Nick Cave, "An Introduction to The Gospel According to Mark," NickCave.it, http://www.nickcave.it/extra.php?IdExtra=78 (accessed June 19, 2013).

background who had never participated in a Bible study or small group, shares his

experience:[22]

> I've generally come away with more questions than answers, which bothered me at first. I think I came into this expecting more of a lecture format, followed by questions from the group. But now I kind of enjoy it, because the format requires more input from us (without a teacher giving all the answers), it makes me think about it a lot more. Sometimes [the facilitator] will still jump in to help keep us on track and give relevant context, but I now kind of like the free discussion and hearing views of others. It forces me to think more about what Mark is saying, how it all fits together. I don't necessarily agree with all the views (and I'm sure others feel the same way about mine), but I think we all learn something from the collective discussion.

Brian's impressions accurately reflect many of the desired outcomes for a group of this nature. His interaction with the Word resulted in further questions, he experienced a tension of not being given clear "answers" initially, and he benefited from the perspective and interpretation of the others.

Another participant, "Jack," comes from a different context. Having just recently become a Christian through narcotics recovery, prior to this group he had never read the Bible. Jack shares his experiences:

> I didn't really know what to expect—I'd never been in a Bible study before. But immediately I was getting something out of the discussion, and thinking about God in my life in a different way. My [narcotics anonymous] meetings are important to me, but sometimes you just end up focusing on yourself and your own recovery. Reading Mark with these guys, I hear their story and what God is doing with them, and I feel like we're connected to Jesus' Story somehow.

By the fall of 2013, Sequoia Church leadership decided to extend the "412" discovery-based gatherings church-wide. Once more existing small groups and studies were asked to interrupt their teaching schedule in order to offer a number of Discover Community groups based on the above model. Moving beyond the topical discussions of

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[22] The names of the participants have been changed.

earlier Discover Community seasons, this expression was intentionally Bible-based,

utilizing the book of Philippians for group engagement. Facilitators were selected and

trained to use the same interrogative model used in the prototype group. The Sunday

teaching series likewise presented a weekly study of Philippians. Since each group met at

different intervals within the fall, they did not attempt to follow the sequence of the

sermon series, but rather the latter was intended to compliment the small group

discussions.

Initially, group facilitators wrestled with some of the difficulties to be expected of

a community hermeneutic. One group facilitator, "Derek," observes:

> Our first meeting was a bit of a challenge. There was one person who kept voicing his somewhat dubious take on the passage. But others heard him out, pushed back gently, and eventually helped him re-work his thoughts into something that was a great takeaway for us all. And I just got to sit back and watch while this happened!

This observation confirms that biblical community can be messy and does not come

accompanied by easy or stock answers. The Word in the life of the local church will be

organic and create tension among the worshiping community.

Paramount in this approach to spiritual formation is the role of the

facilitator/leader. While the emphasis is on the flatter, more collaborative approach to

authority and learning, there remains an important leadership role. Such leaders should

avoid providing only the "expert" voice, but knowing when to help steer the discussion

and provide help to the group is a skill for sensitive and capable leaders. "Ann," one of

the Discovery Community participants, shares her observations of her group's leader:

> At one point we were stuck, it felt like we were just limited in what we knew of the text as a group. Eventually [our leader] offered some of the background information on the passage, making some connections to what we had already

drawn out. It wasn't much, but knowing when to provide that insight really helped the discussion.

Like the TED conferences and Wikipedia editorial process referenced above, there remains an important role for the authoritative presence in Christian formation, but one that allows for group discovery and construction of ideas. Investing in leaders with this aptitude remains the key challenge within this approach to spiritual formation, but the benefits of such investment are far-reaching. Dan Parodi, Sequoia Church co-pastor and architect of the Discover Community groups, affirms the critical importance of broader leadership and the resulting spiritual health:

> In going out of our way to emphasize these groups are "leaderless," we are underscoring our belief that God's word is something worth ingesting personally and sharing communally—Scripture is absolutely not something that always requires expert study and dissemination. The community we want people to discover is one that includes God's triune face: a Father who converses through his word and prayer; a Son who is alive in the ways the group learns to love and serve one another and a Spirit who actively convicts and leads the group toward his divine purposes.[23]

The "412" experience offers a culturally relevant model of spiritually formative small group environments. While allowing for a communal exchange, it does still rely on a facilitator willing to keep the discussion "on track" and give "relevant context," as Brian and Anna observed. In essence, this is not a full community hermeneutic with a completely open-ended interpretation, but neither is this strict propositional teaching. Knowledge of the Word is constructed via consensus, personal experience, and dialog, while the authority of God's Word and the expectation of divine illumination is maintained. Scripture engagement like this echoes Webber's conviction that younger

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[23] Dan Parodi, email interview with author, Redwood City, CA, October 25, 2013.

evangelicals seek spiritual practices with the force of tradition, communal practice, and freedom behind them.[24]

Flat and Circular: Team-based Church Leadership

A final strategic issue within biblical dialog concerns the structures of church leadership. This discussion is dealt with briefly here because of the ingrained relationship leadership has to biblical proclamation and authority. Jesus announced to his followers, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples," (Matt 28:18-19) establishing the proper Christological authority for disciple making, baptism, and teaching. As the Bible is authoritative only because the incarnate Word is authoritative, so is the Church authoritative only because the Head of the Church is authoritative. Where the issue becomes problematic is in the wielding of such authority through the offices of the church. As Kirk states, "it is virtually impossible to institutionalize cruciformity. The legitimacy of a Christian's authority coming from Christ is found in the re-narration of the Christ story in the life of the person or community."[25] Christians may find comfort, even convenience, in giving authority to a local congregational leadership, but historically evangelicalism's model for authority structures has been drawn from marketplace and consumer culture more than from cruciformity.[26]

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[24] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 185.

[25] J. Daniel Kirk, "Authority Redux," Storied Theology Blog, May 23, 2012, http://www.jrdkirk.com/2012/05/23/narrative-preaching/ (accessed June 20, 2013).

[26] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 240.

Biblical leadership must find its origin in the nature of the Triune God. At the center of the Trinity is relationship, each Person being in perfect, loving association with the other. While the common triangular illustration of this relationship reveals our hierarchal bias, a better model for this may be in a circular understanding. Pastor and ministry consultant George Cladis portrays the Trinity through the image of the *perichoresis*, or circle dance.[27] In this circle, there is always movement, there exists intimacy, and there is equality with marked uniqueness of personhood. Such flatter and circular structures are becoming increasingly useful in media and technology-driven industry, as discussed in Chapter 1. Approaching the task of biblical proclamation through similar leadership structures may better position the Church to fulfill its mandate in the twenty-first century.

After the merge of my Silicon Valley church plant with an existing congregation, the leaders of the two groups were interested in employing a new form of pastoral leadership. Traditional models of hierarchical structures with the senior pastor at the top did not fit our hopes for this new expression of Sequoia Church. A co-pastor structure was agreed upon whereby the two co-lead pastors had equal authority, equal compensation, but different responsibilities. This has allowed us to leverage different strengths, identify deficiencies, and share a passion for who the church could become. The co-pastor structure invites a team-based culture of leadership throughout the expressions of the church, whether staff or volunteer led. Parodi identifies the health benefits of the commitment to broader church leadership in our congregation:

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[27] George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 4.

It is always healthy for leaders to check their self-importance in the life and vibrancy of a church community and discover the ways God (desires!) to work in, around and through the broader community. As leaders we may do well to provide tools, encouragement and framework for the Sprit to be unleashed within the rank-and-file and to see the surprising things God is aching to do—sometimes best achieved by getting out of the way! I wonder, perhaps, if too often we fixate on simply feeding the flock rather than insuring the flock is healthy, well nourished and properly exercised. Maybe this is why the flock is too often found doing little more than milling about the pasture.[28]

A praxis of local churches employing flatter authority structures and embracing a circularity of movement and relationship within those structures is in keeping with Barth's vision for a Christologically informed congregation not based in institution, but thriving in the collected efforts of all members. As Barth has famously proclaimed, "The term 'laity' is one of the worst in the vocabulary of religion and ought to be banished from Christian conversation."[29] Additionally, such value for collaboration and team-based ministry extends beyond the singular congregation, and out into a Kingdom practice of local congregations working in tandem. Criticized by some for leaving a thriving large church, pastor Francis Chan sought to pursue a new model whereby he could put into practice "some of the things his soul was longing for: ministry to the poor, ministry in a large city, a model of church built around smaller communities of believers rather than a megachurch that is most identifiable by its celebrity pastor."[30] In the decentralized digital environment of the early twenty-first century, such commitment to

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[28] Parodi, email interview.

[29] Quoted in R. J. Erler and R. Marquard, eds., *A Karl Barth Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 8-9.

[30] Tyler Charles and Josh Loveless, "The Crazy Mission of Francis Chan," *Relevant Magazine*, February 23, 2011, http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/features/24816-the-crazy-mission-of-francis-chan (accessed June 23, 2013).

smaller expressions bound organically by common mission serves the emerging character

of what is considered effective leadership.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper began with a discussion of *Chain World*, the brainchild of computer game designer Jason Rohrer, who set out to create a digital platform that could spawn a virtual religion.[1] The "Canon Law" of *Chain World* dictated a number of edicts for the cyber-religion, among them, only one player could inhabit the *Chain World* virtual environment at any time; this player could not post signs or text for subsequent players; and should the player tire of his or her existence in this world, suicide was permissible.[2] As noted earlier, it did not take long before these edicts were disregarded, and Roher's creation turned into holy war.[3]

The brief existence of *Chain World* is illuminating on a number of levels, not least of which is the fragile and ultimately futile nature of humanity's attempt at religion. However, more revealing is what the game exposes with regard to life amidst the new realities of digital and social media. One could argue that *Chain World* actually represents the antithesis of the promise of the digital age. Digital media offers the broadest entry point in the history of communication and media. Nearly anyone can produce, upload, comment, and redistribute content to whomever, whenever. *Chain World*, rather, restricts who can create and thrive by the narrowest expression of one. Online outlets of knowledge and information thrive on a decentralized process of collaboration, consensus, and communal movement. *Chain World* mandates a strict top-

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[1] Jason Fagone, "Bigger Than Jesus," 100-105.

[2] Game Design Challenge Vault, "The Game Design Challenge 2011: Bigger Than Jesus," http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1014541/The-Game-Design-Challenge-2011, (accessed June 28, 2013).

[3] Jason Fagone, "Bigger Than Jesus," 103.

down structure; there is one "god," one set of rules. Finally, social media exalts the user experience, even to an *a priori* degree in which users post experiences not as a record, but as an impetus for activity. *Chain World* forbids the user to speak or share of their experience. The irony of *Chain World* is that this religion-building game—a game that won the competition that year—may reflect something closer to the conventions of the religions that it sought to parody. The rejection of the authority of *Chain World* and its edicts by its first inhabitant is truly no different than the rejection of conventional modes of Christianity among society in the digital environment.

It is the contention of this paper that these cultural shifts brought on by digital and social media present a challenge for the evangelical church to frame biblical dialog in such as way as to operate effectively in the environment of the digital native, while still maintaining a high regard for Scripture. If the Information Age edged into the societal field of view initially as a gathering of new, more efficient tools, it has since become a means that has "brought the world together in a manner never before possible… now information can traverse the globe at the speed of light."[4] The resulting impact shapes key epistemological issues such as truth seeking and knowledge discernment. Online modes of search lend high regard for relevance, even to the extent of filtering truthful information beyond the parameters of the seeker's profile. Knowledge assemblage is increasingly constructed through means of consensus and open contribution where the line blurs between "expert" and "enthusiast." As culture has adopted new practices in areas of learning, communication, and discernment, the Church has an obligation to seek

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[4] Grentz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 18.

a new praxis of biblical discourse in order to meet the ethos of this time with truth and grace.

Evangelicals have historically stood on high ground with regard to the place of Scripture, while guarding against epistemological models that would undermine truth and authority. In the new media landscape, such high regard for Scripture remains as crucial as ever, and yet there is an urgency to frame the biblical conversation in such a way that "promotes an open and flexible construal of theology that is inherently self-critical and reforming," in order to remain a relevant cultural voice.[5] Artificial parameters of revelatory and hermeneutical models that the Bible does not claim of itself ought to be held below the high Christological model for Scripture of the Church fathers. The written Word of God, living and active through the incarnate Word of God, is "an agent in the divine economy of salvation," and therefore is to be regarded as the "Word of the Church," the leading edge of the Church's worship, formation, and mission.[6]

The soteriological role and Christological authority of Scripture frame the proclamation and practice of the Word in the Church as Christian leaders explore means by which to invite dialog and discovery. Practices of community hermeneutic and collaborative learning are imperative in order to inspire a generation of uploaders and content creators to encounter Christ through his Word, using the language and tools with which they resonate. Local churches will find receptive participants when authority and leadership structures are developed in flatter, less hierarchical models. These practices are not to abandon the Church's stewardship of the Word to the tangled mess of

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[5] Franke, *The Character of Theology*, 9.

[6] Work, *Living and Active*, 313.

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subjective opinion and language deconstruction, nor does it diminish the reflective study of the student of Scripture. However, they do recognize a "self-leveling" effect of democratized knowledge that celebrates an array of stories and contexts, while aiming toward revelation and truth. Such practice will require an inherent trust in the ministry of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the work of illumination, and to "bring some wholeness back to what we think of as 'knowledge.'"[7]

Late in the twelfth century, Benedictine monks developed a sophisticated technology that allowed for greater regularity and precision of their daily work and prayers. The mechanical clock, a significant improvement over shadow-based clocks, gave the Benedictines what they desired: synchronization and control over the brothers' activities.[8] Witnessing the benefit of such precision, the mechanical clock soon extended beyond the monastery to the marketplace. With greater regularity and control came greater production, which in turn led to greater demand and consumption. The tool had transformed the times. Like the clock, the development of digital media as tools to make production more efficient has been embraced without significant social reflection. It is in the years after the initial adoption of such technologies where outcomes and intentions inherent in the technology are revealed.

Today's Christian leaders stand at this edge of changing times. The construction of knowledge and the discernment of truth will continue to be issues with critical implications for the congregations of Silicon Valley that have become the spiritual communities of many who develop these tools, as well as the countless churches serving

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[7] Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 58.

[8] Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, 14-15.

digital media users. However, it is specifically in the areas of knowledge and truth where

the purposes of God to restore his broken cosmos are revealed. The Word of God, sent

out from the Risen Son, to his apostles, through his Church, remains the greatest

knowledge and the highest truth for the follower of Jesus. To this end, the charge of Paul

to his young colleague is unequivocal:

> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tm 3:14-17).

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