

The Church and Electronic Media--Foundational Issues: Our Addiction to Efficiency and the Myth of Neutrality¹

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It is imperative that we reflect with care on the use of specific applications of electronic media in the Church. It is also imperative, however, that we do not simply use the same framework and mindset of electronic media itself as we do this discernment. In this paper I address two common misperceptions at the foundational or framework level and offer corrections to them.

First thesis

In order to discern well appropriate use of electronic media we must recognize that efficiency is only one characteristic of many to use when evaluating what is best. Efficiency is not synonymous with best; yet for many people in the world today “most efficient” and “best” have become synonymous. For instance for someone to state that one alternative is more efficient than another is often taken to be equivalent to stating it is the preferable alternative. To be told a more efficient model of is available tugs at people to get it—to have the best.

A definition of “best” is: to do something in the most advantageous, suitable or desirable way. To do something in the most efficient way means to do it in a way that uses the least amount of time, money, energy, space, etc. Efficiency is calculated; it can be measured by numbers. Sometimes the most efficient alternative is the best, but not always. For instance we have a front-loading washing machine in our house. It is more efficient than a top loading washer. It washes clothes cleaner using less water, less electricity and less soap. It also is easier on clothes and spins them dryer. It would seem this front-loading washer is both better and more efficient than a top-loading washer. I think we did the best thing in buying this washer. In Honduras, however, I would say that buying this efficient washer would not be the best thing to do. When we lived in Honduras Norma did our laundry. She washed it by hand on a cement washboard. She used a lot of water, but no electricity. She got the clothes as clean or cleaner than a washing machine, but it took her hours to do so and it was very rough on the clothes. They wore out faster. In some ways she is as good as a front-loading washing machine and in others much worse. It is, however, definitely not the most efficient way to clean clothes. But in a land where unemployment is extremely high we thought having our friend Norma wash our clothes was a much better way of getting them clean than buying a washing machine. Not because it is more efficient, but because it gave Norma a job and allowed us to share meals with her on washing days.

Efficient is also not the same as effective. To be effective is to achieve a desired result or purpose. You can be effective without being efficient, and at times efficiency might hinder effectiveness. The following example from Shane Hipps’s book, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, demonstrates that efficient communication is not always effective. He recounts how early in his career in an ad agency he mirrored what others did “shooting off e-

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mails to the relevant parties in other departments detailing . . . requests and noting deadlines.” People in the company considered E-mail, a lifesaver; stating it was so much more efficient. Yet Hips found that people in other departments often did not meet deadlines, he would physically have to track down the people and negotiate a solution to the problem at hand. Often when he did, they would dig in their heels and not cooperate. He decided to try an experiment. He reports:

For two weeks I decided only to make my project requests in person. I would sit down in other people’s offices; inevitably, we would carry on inefficient conversations about non-work-related matters and eventually discuss my project needs. It was often difficult to find people, and I spent a lot of time walking around the building, looking for my colleagues. It felt like a lot more work to do it this way, and initially, it took longer—but I found there to be a number of benefits.

As deadlines approached, people from other departments actually came to find me to deliver my requests in person, and I encountered none of the typical resistance. I also discovered they worked on my projects before they worked on my colleagues’ e-mail requests, even those requests with tighter deadlines. Our face-to-face meetings built a relationship in a way e-mail could not. These relationships made all the difference in making both of our jobs more enjoyable. It was somewhat inefficient at first, and I was in contact with them less frequently, but our face-to-face connections were more meaningful and effective in the long run.

A few years later I learned my personal experiment had been done on a larger scale by professors at Stanford Business School. They focused on business negotiations made face to face, over the telephone, and via e-mail. Not surprisingly, they found that negotiations performed exclusively over e-mail broke down far more often than face-to-face or even telephone negotiations.³

What are some examples from your life where the most efficient approach and the best approach are not necessarily the same? Some are probably simple, I prefer “old fashioned” oatmeal that takes five minutes to cook over the more efficient one-minute or instant varieties. Others are of more significance. We would not necessarily agree on all of them—you may think the more efficient oatmeal actually is the best. I ask the question not in order to make a list of things where best and most efficient do not match, rather to invite reflection on what other characteristics we use to determine what is the best option. In addition to efficiency we might also consider aesthetics, and also ask whether it is fair, just, truthful? Will it enhance relationship with others and creation; how will it affect our health, our soul? We must include these and other values as we discern appropriate use of electronic media.

To include other values is not to erase efficiency from the list. Note in my thesis I did not reject efficiency as a value, rather I said that we must recognize that efficiency is only one characteristic of many. Perhaps a moderate thesis, but in a context in which efficiency often trumps all it is not necessarily an easy one to live out. Kosuke Koyama, amongst others, would tell us we must resist efficiency as the default best option because at the heart of Christianity is not efficiency but the cross. Koyama would add meaning making to the above list of values. He writes that efficiency suffocates meaning. Yet, “the most extreme example of the triumph of

³ Shane Hips, *The hidden power of electronic culture: how media shapes faith, the Gospel, and church* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2005), 113–14.

meaning over the idolatry of efficiency is the crucifixion of Christ. There Christ demonstrates the depth of his sincerity in the most painful and ‘inefficient’ way.”⁴

Second Thesis

People commonly refer to electronic media, the Internet, cell phones, tablets, etc. as morally neutral tools. They state that it is the use of them that is either good or bad. In response I have a two-part thesis. *First, no tool or medium is neutral; it influences both the content it carries and the user of the tool. Second, to treat the medium as passive is a grave mistake because it leads to ignoring the medium itself and only evaluating whether the intended purpose for using it is good or bad.* I want to add a clarification on language. Although it is accurate to say that tools are not neutral, it may be more helpful to use the terms “passive” and “active.” To argue that no medium is neutral is not to advocate for then evaluating which ones are good and which ones are bad, but to maintain that they are not passive.

The medium affects the content communicated through that medium. Part of that is reception. An audio book, with the same exact content, is received differently than one that is read. A movie telling the same story can move a person through using images and music in a way a book cannot. The medium, however, is not just about reception; it also shapes and changes the content itself. A book must include words to identify who is talking. The movie does not have to; it will show us. A book takes us inside a character’s head in ways a movie cannot. Movies will edit out many details—time is limited and the medium requires movement, action. We can think of more extreme examples. Think of tools like PowerPoint or Twitter; you can only put so much information on one screen or so many characters in one tweet. These limits shape and influence content.

Clearly, as communicators of the gospel and theological truths we must discern how the mediums we use act upon the content communicated through them. Just as important, if not more important, is to recognize that as we actively use tools they also act upon us, change us. As John Culkin states, “We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.”⁵ John Dyer, in his book *From Garden to the City* has excellent chapters on this theme of neutrality. He wisely starts with an example far from the Internet—the shovel. If you use a shovel to dig holes all day what will happen? There will be holes in ground, but also you will have blisters and sore muscles. If you continue using it what will happen? You will build muscles and develop callouses. We use the shovel and the shovel changes us.

Electronic media is active in a variety of ways. I will share just a few examples. Think about the changes that occur in a room if we turn on the television—it is active, not neutral. Regardless of the content—good or bad--the device itself influences our lives. Arthur Boers, in his book, *Living in Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions*, reports what a friend told him about his experience of exercising at the YMCA over many years.

When he started, he noted the camaraderie of fellow exercisers. They would laugh and

⁴ Kōsuke Koyama, “The Crucified Christ Challenges Human Power,” in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. by Sugirtharajah, R. S. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 150–151.

⁵ Quoted in, John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 36.

chat . . . Over time, he got to know some of them a little and they would pick up the line of conversation from when they had last seen each other. Then one year, televisions were installed. Conversation diminished, as people uniformly focused on the screens. There were occasional comments on or laughter about what was shown, but there was a lot less visiting than previously. Some years after that, people began exercising with their own MP3 players and now everyone was cut off from each other.⁶

We shape our tools and then our tools shape us. A colleague, a chemistry professor, observed how the switch to online homework has brought changes beyond efficiency and the opportunity for the students to receive immediate feedback. The computer program only checks the answer, not how the student got the answer. He said, “In science how you get the answer, how you think is what is key—we are training students to do science. The medium, however, leads students to focus on answers as being important and I no longer see or interact with the work they do to get an answer.”

A final example displays all three of the points I have made. The medium is not only active at the level of how content is received, the medium is active in shaping and changing content because of the limits and demands of the tool, and the medium is active in changing the user. On April 26, 2010 there was an article in the *NY Times* by Elisabeth Bumiller titled, “We Have Met the Enemy and He is PowerPoint.” Gen. James N. Mattis is quoted in the article as saying “PowerPoint makes us stupid.” Brig. Gen. H. R. McMaster observed, “[PowerPoint is] dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control. . . . Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable.” He critiques the use of rigid lists of bullet points (in, say, a presentation on a conflict’s causes) that take no account of interconnected political, economic and ethnic forces. “If you divorce war from all of that, it becomes a targeting exercise.” The large use of PowerPoint slides has changed what many officers do in their daily work. Some junior officers are now called PowerPoint Rangers because of how much time they put into preparing slides. The article acknowledges there are some excellent uses of PowerPoint. My point is not that this tool is totally negative. Rather the point is it is active. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us.

Therefore since the tools and applications related to the Internet and electronic media are active our biggest error is to be passive in evaluation of the tool and only actively evaluate the purpose for using the tool. John Dyer, the Executive Director of Communications and Educational Technology for Dallas Theological Seminary and a presenter in this conference, captures the contrast between passivity and active discernment in these lines in *Christianity Today*. He wrote, “When it comes to technology in the church, I believe that the technology that has the most promise in the church is not the latest thing that comes off the assembly line. Rather, it is the technology—any technology—that church leaders openly discuss with other leaders and their congregations. Conversely, the technology that is most perilous for a church is the one that leaders immediately adopt without thinking through and addressing how it will subtly reshape our spiritual lives.”⁷ In relation to the first thesis I advocated for doing more than asking what is the most efficient when seeking the best option. In relation to the second thesis I join Dyer in

⁶ Arthur P Boers, *Living into Focus Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2012), 127.

⁷ Brad Abare, Mark Kellner, and John Dyer, “The Best and Worst New Tech: Which new technologies hold the most promise—and the most peril—for use in church ministries?” *Christianity Today* (Nov. 2009): 63.

advocating for not only evaluating the purpose of a technological tool, but to also ask questions about how use of the tool changes us and shapes content. We must ask what does it displace? What will be gained? What will be lost? Perhaps even more important is to not just ask these questions before adopting a tool, but to stop and ask the same questions after it is in use and address unforeseen ways the medium has shaped and changed us.

We get a hint of this sort of active reflection on medium options in 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4 as Paul discusses his choice to write a letter rather than go to Corinth. There are, however, very few examples of this explicit reflection on medium choice in the Bible. Yet, even though we do not have access to the evaluative discernment process we still can profit from observing the medium choices in the Bible. For instance we can reflect on why Jesus commonly used parables as a medium of discourse or why he chose not to write documents.

We will briefly explore just one example, what missiologist Lamin Sanneh has called the translation principle.⁸ At the heart of Christianity is a very significant decision about medium. Christianity is a unique missionary religion in that it is not language based. It is always translated; it uses all languages. This was true from the beginning. Sanneh reminds us that the Gospels themselves “are translated and interpreted versions of the teaching and preaching of Jesus.”⁹ And it is not just that they are in Greek rather than Aramaic; it is the Greek of the market rather than literary Greek. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “The same divine humility which decreed that God should become a baby at a peasant-woman’s breast, and later an arrested field-preacher in the hands of Roman police, decreed also that He should be preached in a vulgar, prosaic and unliterary language.”¹⁰ Sanneh, himself a convert from Islam, notes the marked contrast with Islam which rejected translation. In Islam the word of God became book and Islam is bound up in words and symbols. In Christianity the word of God became flesh wearing a crown of thorns.

I will highlight a few ways that Sanneh’s work on the translation principle relates to our theme.

- First, it underscores the thesis that the medium is not neutral. Sanneh points to many impacts that flow from translation of the Bible, impacts far beyond what many translators imagine. For instance an early modern missionary may have translated for the simple goal of being better able to communicate the gospel. But Sanneh argues that “Christianity is a form of indigenous empowerment by virtue of vernacular translation.”¹¹ And this cultural empowerment happened in spite of some of the missionaries’ latent or intentional imperialism. Mediums are active and powerful. And as I have already stated, we shape them, but they also shape us. For instance, new insights arise from translating the Bible into other languages. Theological change flows both ways in the missionary endeavor.

- Second, the translation principle points to God’s dynamic activity in the world. God does not choose one right language for all times and places. In a related way we can say that God has not

⁸ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, American Society of Missiology series no. 13 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

⁹ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin: Homecoming of an African* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012), 222.

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, quoted in Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin*, 222–23.

¹¹ Sanneh, *Summoned from the Margin*, 217.

chosen one correct medium for all times and places. We are free to adopt new mediums. We appropriately explore using new tools of electronic media in God's mission today. Saying there is no right language points to the reality that all languages have both merits and demerits as bearers of the gospel. Just as we do well to acknowledge and work to address weaknesses in a particular language, we should do the same in relation to particular applications of the Internet.

- Third, Sanneh correctly relates the translation principle to the incarnation itself. In both we see God making medium decisions. God chose to use humble mediums that prioritize connection and presence over control of information. We must keep this model and these priorities in mind as we evaluate the use of electronic media in our Christian communities today.

Conclusion

God became flesh and dwelt amongst us. Presence matters. Incarnation, Emmanuel, God with us, is at the heart of Christianity. Let us include presence as one of the characteristics we use along with others, including efficiency, as we evaluate what are the best tools for discipleship and mission today. As we discern and evaluate the active roles of various media let us ask how they might increase or decrease presence. That may sound like an indirect critique of most all the tools of electronic media. It is true that the digital age teaches us that presence does not matter. Electronic media often separates us from those we are with as it connects us with those who are distant. (Think of the image of a group of people sitting at a table in a coffee shop all engaged not with each other, but with their phones or tablets.) To highlight the importance of presence is not, however, meant as blanket rejection of all mediated communication. Rather, in the spirit of this paper it is a call to deliberate, careful and profound reflection. There are not simple or universal answers in relation to the questions of presence and the Internet. For instance those researching the question of whether Facebook increases connection or increases loneliness point out many variables. If Facebook users have strong networks of friends outside of Facebook and use it to build on those relationships and to coordinate face-to-face social gatherings Facebook can increase connection. But as the proportion of online interaction to face-to-face interaction increases, the more people use Facebook the lonelier they become. Researchers would add that it also depends how you are using Facebook, details we do not have time for today.¹² I mention this one example just to underscore the importance of careful, deliberate and in-depth discernment. As we consider particular uses of specific mediums may the Spirit guide us in reflecting on the broad foundational issues explored in this paper. Through that reflection may we be better enabled to facilitate profound connection and act as agents of God's presence in a world of alienation and absence.

¹² Stephen Marche, "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?," *Atlantic Monthly* 309, no. 4 (May 2012): 60–69.