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BEING THE CHURCH IN THE AGE OF POST-LITERACY¹

by James A. Neuendorf

“Indeed, the apogee has almost been attained: Communication has just about reached the lowest point, with respect to its importance; and contemporaneously the means of communication have pretty nearly attained the highest point, with respect to quick and overwhelming distribution. For what is in such haste to get out, and on the other hand what has such widespread distribution as ... twaddle? Oh, procure silence!” — Soren Kierkegaard, 1851²

AT THIS VERY MOMENT, a revolution is taking place around us. Words, ideas, stories and creative works are being spread and shared practically at the speed of a brain’s neural network. The computing power of so-called “Space Age” achievements is now ubiquitous to the point that you can find it in juice-stained toys for toddlers. Global society is adapting to new ways of communicating and processing information in what is the second greatest upheaval in communication since Gutenberg’s 1438 printing press. Human thought processes have once again been fundamentally changed by the proliferation of a new technology. We no longer stand at the edge of a new age; it has already begun.

For missiologists of the 21st century seeking to carry the Gospel once more into a fallen world, these technological changes signify a far deeper shift than merely that of paper to pixel. The changes that are brought about by a new cycle of technology affect fundamental thought processes throughout the globe. Transcendent of all the existing cultural and socio-economic frontiers, the pervasiveness of digital mobile technology is birthing a new meta-culture. Everyone seems to be wringing their hands and saying, “How will we reach these people?” Yet, with each passing hour, we

begin to find that “these people” are us.

Marshall McLuhan, the renowned communication scholar expressed it this way:

We now live in the early part of an age for which the meaning of print culture is becoming as alien as the meaning of the manuscript culture was to the 18th century. We’re primitives of a new culture ... there is a new electric technology that threatens this ancient technology of literacy built upon the

phonetic alphabet. Our Western values, built on the written word, have already been considerably affected by electronic media ... Perhaps that’s the reason why many highly literate people in our time find it difficult to examine this question without getting into a moral panic.³

Secular scholars like Marshall McLuhan, Christian writers like Malcolm Boyd and some leaders in the Lutheran church began to see this problem arising already in the 1960s with the explosive growth of broadcast technologies. Yet these

visionaries still couldn’t imagine the scope and scale of what was to come.

Oral cultures

“The oral tradition that dominated human experience for all but the last few hundred years is returning with a vengeance. It’s a monumental, epoch-making,

Post-literate Christians and unbelievers are seeking a biblical confession of the faith in their own language and culture, a meta-narrative with which to understand their own life and purpose.

¹ Editor’s note: Mr. Neuendorf’s paper was prepared for and originally used as an oral presentation and as such, some of the page numbers in the citations are not complete.

² Malcolm Boyd. *Crisis in Communication; a Christian Examination of the Mass Media* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957).

³ Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 10–11.

Communication has moved well beyond printed words and TV broadcasts, bringing on a post-literate generation relying on Internet-based communications, direct observation and individual life experience to determine what is factual and true.

totally unforeseen turn of events. How can this possibly be? The oral tradition? With multimedia texts and IMs and Facebook status updates, aren't we relying on oral communication far less than ever? Yes, of course. But our new digital culture of information sharing has so rejected the broadcast style and embraced key elements of oral traditions that we might meaningfully call whatever's coming next the digital era. And while this new age will undoubtedly contain elements of both traditions — which we will explore momentarily — the digital era borrows much more from oral traditions than broadcast.” — Jonah Sachs⁴

Human societies around the globe had communicated the same way for thousands of years: since the Fall, through the flood and tower of Babel, the scattering of societies across the planet and the ages of empires and kingdoms to the birth of Christianity. All cultures prior to 1450, despite vast differences in culture or language, shared a unified mode of primary communication, namely oral culture. Although the languages and themes varied from society to society, the traits remained the same. The invention of the printing press was a radical shock to that global culture of communication in the same way that the present digital revolution is sending shockwaves through the culture of literacy.

Recently, there has been significant study dedicated to the oral cultures that (from a numerical standpoint) still dominate the globe. Many sociologists argue that we are returning to oral culture through our new technologies. So, right off the bat, it is important to deal with the word “illiterate” that has become synonymous with unintelligent in literate society. Oral cultures must first of all not be mistaken as in any way less intelligent or capable than literate societies. They simply apply their intelligence in different ways and organize their thought based on the technologies available to them. The way of thinking of an oral society is almost impossible for us to fully understand and imagine as people of literate/post-literate societies. It is worth remembering that the renowned work of Greek literature, *The Iliad*, is itself an oral composition,⁵

as was the formative English work *Beowulf*.^{6,7} Jesus Himself preached and taught in the midst of a primarily oral society and did so in oral ways. Orality does not indicate a lack of sophistication. Perhaps for Western minds to avoid unnecessary and inaccurate stigmas, it is best to refer to primary oral societies as “oral” and not illiterate.

One of the key characteristics of the “technology” of human speech is its relationship to the nature of sound. Sound is never static. You cannot stare at a sound. The instant you begin to hear a word it is also already passing by you. Compare a cassette tape with a photograph (for those of you who remember tapes). A photograph you can stare at and continue to find new details; the image is static. The cassette tape is a long, wound-up ribbon of magnetic tape, but you can only experience its content one instant at a time. You are, in a sense, always hearing in the present. If you pause the tape, you don't hear anything. Oral societies reflect this in their own understanding of the world. Words are always fluid; they are not something you can tie down and examine. Information, therefore, is perpetually in motion.

One major effect of this is the necessity for constant repetition and remembering of important things, so that they continuously affect the present. A close study of the Book of Deuteronomy will demonstrate the importance of this. Throughout Deuteronomy, the phrases are repeated, “Hear oh Israel,” “Remember and do not forget,” and “Write this upon your hearts.” The Israelites were an oral society (the existence of writing does not make them a literate society as we will explore later). It was important for the Israelites to constantly repeat the Law and to use mental guides and symbols like fringes, symbols in the tabernacle and temple, circumcision and the like to keep the truth in front of them at all times.

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on

⁴ Jonah Sachs. *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell—and Live—the Best Stories Will Rule the Future* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

⁵ J. A. Davison. “E. T. Owen: The Story of the Iliad as Told in the Iliad. Pp. Xii 248. London: Bell, 1947. Cloth, 10s. 6d. Net.” *The Classical Review* 63, no. 02 (12 1949), 70.

⁶ “Beowulf: A New Translation for Oral Delivery.” *Choice Reviews Online* 47, no. 01 (12, 2009), 47–0122

⁷ Robert Payson Creed. “How the Beowulf Poet Composed His Poem.” *Oral Tradition* 18, no. 2 (12 2004), 214–15.

the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:6-9).⁸

In fact, when Israel's unfaithfulness leads them to cease repeating and remembering, the Law is completely lost! The Judean king Josiah's sudden discovery of the book of the Law (a recording of something they were supposed to remember orally and keep at all times written on their hearts) completely reforms the kingdom. In oral societies, a message not continually repeated in the present is a message that is lost to the past.

The idea of truth as something to be pursued through abstract logical proofs is foreign to oral societies. Truth and "facts" are determined through observing and experiencing the world. For someone to doubt what is clearly evident from experiences confirmed by several trusted sources, including oneself, is foolish to oral societies. DesCartes' famous (and highly literate) philosophical insight, "I think, therefore I am"⁹ would be utterly ridiculous to an oral society simply content with "Obviously, we can all see that I am."

This phenomenon can be observed in field work¹⁰ done by A. R. Luriiia in Uzbekistan among literates and illiterates, where trying to get abstract definitions of concrete objects from an oral culture proved fruitless:

In Luriiia's field work, requests for definitions of even the most concrete objects met with resistance. "Try to explain to me what a tree is. 'Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is, they don't need me telling them' replied one illiterate peasant, aged 22 (1976, p.86) Why define, when a real-life setting is infinitely more satisfactory than a definition? Basically, the peasant was right. There is no way to refute the world of primaryorality. All you can do is walk away from it into literacy."¹¹

The work of A.R. Luriiia also reveals another key component of oral society: what is not already in concrete form must be shared through metaphors. From Ong's quotation of Luriiia's field work in Uzbekistan:

Illiterate (oral) subjects identified geometrical figures

by assigning them the names of objects, never abstractly as circles, squares, etc. A circle would be called a plate, sieve, bucket, watch or moon; a square would be called a mirror, door, house, apricot drying-board. Luriiia's subjects identified the designs as representations of real things they knew. They never dealt with abstract circles or squares but rather with concrete objects. Teachers' school students on the other hand, moderately literate, identified geometrical figures by categorical geometric names: circles, squares, triangles, and so on (1976, pp. 32-9) They had been trained to give schoolroom answers, not real life responses.¹²

A person may be able to observe a tree and not need any abstract description of it, but the concept of love for example can only be depicted through story and metaphor. When Luriiia's subjects were looking at abstract shapes like triangles, they assumed that they were supposed to interpret them as a metaphor for something concrete. The idea of an abstract concept without an immediate real world counterpart doesn't even enter into their heads.

A biblical expression of this concept can be found in essentially any of the Psalms or poetic/prophetic books. These books contain very abstract concepts, but are told through miniature stories and metaphors using real-world objects and people. For an extreme example look at the life of the Prophet Hosea, his entire and real life is used as a series of metaphors portraying abstract concepts.

Personal and group experiences are the best ways to determine the truth of things in an oral culture. Abstract thinking is impossible without real world analogs. Therefore the expansion of one's limited experience can only be done through the world of stories. Stories are a means of packaging valuable information in a way that taps into our experiential learning. Steven Pinker is a cognitive scientist and Harvard professor who describes story's role this way:

Fictional narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face some day and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them. What are the options if I were to suspect that my uncle killed my father, took his position, and married my mother? If my hapless older brother got no respect in the family, are there circumstances that might lead him to betray me? ... The cliché that

⁸ For an interesting exploration of orality in the Jewish context see: Natalie B. Dohrmann's "Orality and Ideology in Rabbinic Judaism." *Prooftexts* 24, no. 2 (12 2004), 199-206

⁹ René Descartes. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (Raleigh: Alex Catalogue, 199-?).

¹⁰ A. R. Luriiia. *Cognitive Development, Its Cultural and Social Foundations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

¹¹ Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹² Ibid.

life imitates art is true because the function of some kinds of art is for life to imitate it.¹³

The parables and teachings of Jesus Christ are the clearest example of the Gospel shared in an oral society. Jesus doesn't dedicate His ministry to didactic teaching of doctrine but to using stories, metaphors and concrete objects and situations to bring understanding to a world that is impossible for the human mind to conceive of. Phrases like, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed" reveal the heart of the metaphorical, concrete oral thinking that Jesus was addressing.

The literate mind is overwhelmingly concerned with novelty, but oral societies cherish familiarity. This concept again returns to the fleeting nature of spoken language. Without independent abstract thought, oral cultures use formulaic stories and proverbs to guide understanding. Any analysis of folk and fairy tales will find them populated by what appear to be rather one-dimensional stereotypical characters.

Jesus own parables often follow a formula, "There was a man/king/master/farmer who had X number of sons/servants/wedding guests; he does something and then Y happens. This is how it is in the kingdom of heaven: I tell you the truth, Z." Jesus does little to describe what the farmer is like, what his family is like and whether he has a long beard or not; those details are irrelevant to the metaphor. When Jesus says, "A sower went out to sow his field," everyone knows who that is and what one looks like. Jesus' characters are archetypes, as are common and accepted in oral society. Archetypes and formulas allow for characters and concepts to be conveyed via something as simple as a "fig tree." Everyone knows what a king is like, but as soon as the story is about a particular king who acts differently, we need much more information and the events are open to far more interpretation. Jesus makes frequent use of this to call attention to heavenly realities.

The formulaic nature of oral communication allows for groups of different people to understand the story in similar ways, whether they agree with it or not. It is clear in the New Testament that the Pharisees were able to catch the meanings of what Jesus was saying through His parables; they took issue not with varying interpretations of the stories but with what they plainly meant. There was very little wiggle room for interpreting the stories in different ways.

Living in oral cultures

Because oral cultures receive information through experiences, the first priority in training a young person for the world is to get them some of those experiences in a safe environment. You actually have lived in an oral culture yourself. Children are all naturally born into an oral culture; they know nothing of written language for the first formative years of their lives. To learn to walk we watch others and try to do it ourselves, teaching our muscles what works and what makes us fall on our faces. These experiences are improved by the encouragement of our parents who gently encourage us and praise our successes. As children grow, they begin to model what their parents do, cradling a baby doll, pushing a lawnmower, gaining experiences to help define their world. The focus on repetition and concrete analogs is as true of children as it is of oral cultures. As we attend school and move on into literacy, we lose our interest in familiarity and repetition and gain a preference for novelty. As a child, I watched Star Wars so much that we wore the VHS tapes completely out; today I look back on the films fondly but have little interest in seeing them again.

In oral societies, this same type of learning continues into adulthood; you learn by doing, and there is no manual or how to book. Sailors "learned the ropes" by observing, following orders and listening to the encouragement/discouragement of other sailors. Stories are ways to teach more abstract and dangerous lessons where the natural failure as a part of a learning curve is not an option.

In contrast, literate culture is nearly the exact opposite in every respect. It is important to clarify that the broader culture of literacy lags at least 3,000 years behind the invention of writing. Since the earliest known alphabet, writing was reserved for recording lists, marking dates, and recording important oral presentations. In many ways the original use of writing was as a sort of tape-recorder that could be played back by a person who could read. Literacy as a "culture" existed only among the extremely wealthy and elite for the first several thousand years. Despite the technological capabilities, the expense and difficulty of maintaining a broad culture of literacy kept it out of global society until Johann Gutenberg and Martin Luther.

The first major clash in the battle with this new culture was fought in Greek society. Plato spoke against writing in Phaedrus and his Seventh Letter calling it mechanical and

¹³ Steven Pinker. *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997).

inhuman, particularly the fact that you could never ask a text a question, that it portrayed dead ideas (in contrast to the constant present of oral society).

Plato was thinking of writing as an external, alien technology, as many people today think of the computer. Because we have by today so deeply interiorized writing, made it so much a part of ourselves, as Plato's age had not yet made it fully a part of itself (Havelock 1963), we find it difficult to consider writing to be a technology as we commonly assume printing and the computer to be. Yet writing (and especially alphabetic writing) is a technology, calling for the use of tools and other equipment: styli or brushes or pens, carefully prepared surfaces such as paper, animal skins, strips of wood, as well as inks or paints, and much more. Clanchy (1979, pp. 88-115) discusses the matter circumstantially, in its western medieval context, in his chapter entitled 'The technology of writing'. Writing is in a way the most drastic of the three technologies. It initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist.¹⁴

The concept that ideas could be captured and put into a recorded medium that didn't change was a sharp contrast from oral culture. Words, once fleeting, could be tied down and kept to read over and over again. The changes began to be felt in small ways even in Jesus' day. While Jesus (though clearly literate as demonstrated by Luke 4:16) never left us anything written in His own hand, the Early Christian Church shared theological reflection and understanding through texts. Until Gutenberg however, these texts themselves were still almost impossible to possess for the vast majority of society, and most people remained in an oral culture. It was this reality which led the church of the era to communicate to its members primarily through music and the arts and architecture, and to leave reading the scriptures to its priests.

It was Luther and Gutenberg then who brought about the great sweeping change in European society with the introduction of true universal literacy. Suddenly what had been expensive and mysterious (written in Latin and copied by hand) became cheap and easy to understand with just a little education (printed in mass and written in local languages). While not totally gone, oral society

came crashing down in Europe, and by extension in North America. The European mind itself had to be restructured to make sense of this new technology. One recalls the fascination of St. Augustine in observing Ambrose reading: "His eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still. Anyone could approach him freely and guests were not commonly announced, so that often, when we came to visit him, we found him reading like this in silence, for he never read aloud."¹⁵ The idea of reading as something internal and not just a recording of an oral presentation to be accessed by a group together was unimaginable to pre-literate Europe.

The Reformation

The Lutheran Reformation was largely successful because of this radical shift in thought and technology. Lutherans could encourage the lost to seek out for themselves the truth in Scripture in their own language. The great threat at the time was the outrageously false teaching coming from the only ones with access to the information. Theological works expanded on and delved into what the words of Scripture meant and implored people to compare what Holy Scripture said with the doctrines and teachings of the Catholic church. While as Lutherans we teach that reason must be subject to faith, it was God-given reason and logic that distinguished the disparity between what Scripture said and what the church was teaching. Definitions and analysis of individual portions of Scripture and theological concepts enforced clarity and resolved confusion created through purely anecdotal and artistic communication from the church.

Most importantly, as a result of the printing press, ideas were shared and spread so easily that it was nearly impossible to stop them. No matter how many books and authors were burned, they were printing and writing thousands more. To stop an idea from spreading in an oral culture, you remove the person making the offensive argument, to stop an idea in a literate culture, you must demonstrate an alternative argument that proves the original one incorrect.

However, after the first key years, Lutherans were no longer the only ones involved in the printing and dissemination of complex ideas. As time went on and the human mind began to change with this new technology,

¹⁴ Ong.

¹⁵ Augustine. F. J. Sheed and Michael P. Foley, ed. *Confessions*, vol. 6 (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2006).

other ideas began to arise. The technology that allowed Luther to share his reformation also permitted people to speak out against all sorts of authorities. Luther was followed by others and the powerful institution of the Roman Catholic church began to splinter. The American Revolution was the culmination of a centuries old war of ideas fought in books and printing presses regarding the role of governments. When blood was spilled in Lexington, it spread across the globe igniting wars and toppling the old authorities of the medieval age. The French Revolution, Simon Bolivar's liberation of the Americas and more were a result of a culture of literacy.

The new technology became a battleground of facts versus theories, analysis of texts and cataloging and categorizing the world according to a subscribed world view. For the first time in history, a dictionary was needed to store words that were not commonly understood or had fallen completely out of use. In an oral society a word which was no longer known to everyone was a word that vanished from the language, now it was defined and stored away just in case it should have a use again.

The roles of the elderly and of traditions were subjected to a special assault, cast aside in the quest for novelty.

Since in primary oral culture, conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old. By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and, even more, print downgrade the figures of the wise old man and wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new.¹⁶

Science, religion and political/economic philosophy were divorced from each other for the first time in thousands of years. Nothing could be taken for granted unless it was analyzed, catalogued and recorded. Even theology was categorized and divided into scientific schools with the new pedagogical divisions of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Oral holism had become outdated, and scientific sectarianism became king.

Rather than remember what God has done and does, literate society began to demand that God prove Himself according to its standards. Darwin's *Origin of Species* challenged the Christian faith on the grounds of logic and scientific method, and the Church tried to respond in kind with logical proofs to the contrary. For the first time in human history, the existence of divinity was not naturally assumed by everyone.

The calculated analysis of how everything worked led mankind to believe that eventually we could find out all knowledge and could create the perfect society. The quest was on for the best society, the best ideas, the best representation of the world we lived in. Thinking became primarily analytical and linear; one thing leads to another without tangential ideas. Each individual must analyze the evidence provided by this catalogue of ideas and determine who is presenting the truth. The meta-narrative and teleology of what all the pieces meant were sacrificed to the scientific methodology, reducing existence to that which is merely material. The Holy Grail of the literate culture became the attainment of a "theory of everything," a crusade that modern physicists and scientists still doggedly pursue like lab coated Knights Templar.¹⁷

Teleological narratives were pushed to the side as mere entertainment, information and truth could only be discovered through analysis and "hard facts." Naturally, this focus brought about incredible advances in physical science and technological design, while also promoting a rejection of spiritual truths. With its constant technological and philosophical progress, Western civilization began to describe itself with the term "Enlightened." Mysticism and spirituality became the pariah of literate cultures, as though the realities of a world unknowable to science rendered its existence impossible.

The Lutheran church itself split between those who held to childlike faith in an inspired biblical truth and those who claimed to be above the "antiquated myths" of the Word of God. The narrative of Scripture was eviscerated by Jesus Seminar scholars seeking a materialist explanation of Scripture. The rejection of biblical inspiration because it didn't fit human logic led to a loss of the Gospel message itself, undoing much of the work brought about by the original reformation.

¹⁷ For a fascinating criticism of the modern limits on the sciences imposed by materialism, see William A. Dembski's *Being as Communion: A Metaphysics of Information*.

¹⁶ Ong.

Print technology brought about the intellectual concept of a closed-set world, one where it is in fact possible to measure and catalog and store all of the information in the universe in books. You can sense the optimism at the height of the literate era with the invention of the telegraph as though they were building a second Tower of Babel. Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick write in their 1858 book *The Story of the Telegraph*:¹⁸

Of all the marvelous achievements of modern science the electric telegraph is transcendently the greatest and most serviceable to mankind ... The whole earth will be belted with the electric current, palpitating with human thoughts and emotions ... How potent a power, then, is the telegraphic destined to become in the civilization of the world! This binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth.

The horrors of World War I were the first death knell of the humanistic literate culture, as each of the marvelous technologies so optimistically forged in the fire of the enlightenment were wielded as weapons of war in the most apocalyptic conflict the world had ever seen. The quest to know all knowledge begat tools to eliminate one's enemies. A literally shell-shocked world crawled out of the rubble of its own hubris and was forced to ask itself a very hard question about the nature of humanity. Was the universe a closed set, something we could completely understand and dominate, or was there a meaning to life not written by man?

The Internet

As the utopian hopes of the literate culture were dashed, the underlying framework for a new era of communication culture was being built. Ironically, the Internet was originally conceived and built to serve as a powerful tool for scientists to share computer power in their quest for the very “literacy holy grail” that the Internet would soon snatch from their grasp.

For the first several years, the Internet was just a digital reflection of print culture; there were broadcasters

and experts who chose what the message would be who produced it and sent it out. The idea of having your own .com or website was foreign, and most churches or even most businesses, for that matter, didn't have a Web presence at all, while forward-thinking individuals bought domain names like *pizza.com* for only a few dollars.¹⁹ The true revolution didn't really happen until the creation of simple content creation tools like *livejournal.com*, *myspace.com* and radical new ways of thinking about content introduced by programs like Napster. Suddenly anyone could use the Internet not to just get information but to share it. As speeds and technology advanced, we arrived at what technologists called Web 2.0, Twitter, Wikipedia, Facebook and YouTube. This was paired with the power of mobile Internet, no longer confining the network to a tower PC at a desk terminal. In 2006, *Time* magazine recognized the “Person of the Year” as “you.” This was in reference to the sudden explosion of content and sharing of information that happened through these technologies. The magazine noted:

Who are these people? Seriously, who actually sits down after a long day at work and says, I'm not going to watch *Lost* tonight. I'm going to turn on my computer and make a movie starring my pet iguana? I'm going to mash up 50 Cent's vocals with Queen's instrumentals? I'm going to blog about my state of mind or the state of the nation or the steak-frites at the new bistro down the street? Who has that time and that energy and that passion?

The answer is, you do. And for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, *Time's* Person of the Year for 2006 is you.

Collaborative media and self-publishing is in the process of toppling the old gatekeeper structure, while at the same time broadening the audience of any given message to a global scale. As billions of personal narratives burst to the surface, new generations interact and live in a world that is increasingly immaterial. Suddenly, a scientific moratorium on anything not purely reducible to matter seems ridiculous. In a world where so much of what we “own” is simply information, meta-narrative is in the process of usurping pure empiricism.

The study of physics itself is also facing a coup.

¹⁸ Charles F. Briggs and Augustus Maverick. *The Story of the Telegraph, and a History of the Great Atlantic Cable a Complete Record of the Inception, Progress, and Final Success of That Undertaking, a General History of Land and Oceanic Telegraphs, Descriptions of Telegraphic Apparatus, and Biographical Sketches of the Principal Persons Connected with the Great Work* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1858).

¹⁹ If you don't remember this era, search YouTube for “The Kid's Guide to the Internet” for a hilarious reminder.

Newtonian determinism is no longer adequate for building a mathematical model of reality, with quantum and relativistic physics ruling the day. Not even the vaunted scientific method is safe; how can we trust science based on observation, if on the quantum level, the act of measurement appears to affect reality?²⁰

Now add on to the explosion of personal narratives engendered by the birth of the Internet the millions of carefully crafted narratives that are targeted at citizens and consumers by politicians and corporations.

Yankelovich, a market research firm, estimates that a person living in a city 30 years ago saw up to 2,000 ad messages a day, compared with up to 5,000 today. About half the 4,110 people surveyed last spring by Yankelovich said they thought marketing and advertising today was out of control ... 'What all marketers are dealing with is an absolute sensory overload,' said Gretchen Hofmann, executive vice president of marketing and sales at Universal Orlando Resort. The landscape is 'overly saturated' as companies press harder to make their products stand out, she said.²¹

Think for a moment about those statistics; a child is given a message intended to persuade the child about something (self, the world, reality, etc.) over 40,000 times in a single year, and an adult receives over 5,000 a day. That's 1,250,000 advertising messages each year! The generations of the digital age are now accustomed to people lying to them, twisting the truth, telling things that are too good to be true, etc. As a result, young people (and increasingly older people) are extremely skeptical of any message that makes extraordinary claims.

Digitotal age

Because of their skepticism and access to information, people in this new "digitotal" age interpret the world in a different way. Unlike the literates before them, "post-literates" discover the world through hearing, seeing and interacting; their own experiences are what move them to belief about what is generally true or false. Information is trustworthy only if it fits into one's own personal meta-narrative. Today, statistics and arguments can be made for

anything, there are whole libraries filled with information supporting both sides of any argument. In the end, these post-literates believe they must rely on their own intuition and experiences to determine what is true and what is false.

At the end of the literate age, this conflict took the form of postmodernism and a premise that there could not be a single truth. For materialists, constrained by antiquated Newtonian determinism, the only explanation for nonmaterial concepts such as truth, love or even simply information, the only answer is postmodernism and a metaphysical multiverse where everything possible is "real." Yet as materialism comes apart at the seams, postmodernism is becoming its first casualty. For this reason, spirituality and meta-narrative are gaining enormous traction even in the west.²²

In its place is a nebulous philosophy largely built on the intersection between empirical information, personal and group experience.

Information that conflicts with a post-literate personal meta-narrative about the universe must either be rejected or fundamentally change the narrative of one's own life. When a Christian claims that all reality centers on Christ and His love for a broken mankind, post-literates look both at the transformative power of this information and at the person making the claim. If the information can easily be demonstrated to be fictional or when the Christian who speaks this message is living according to the narrative of the world, the claim is easily rejected as false. Amazingly, even with the modern explosion of information, personal experience appears to have risen to the top.

To give a simple example, consider the claims of a revolutionary new dietary drink. Images on the side of the Web browser of obese people before and after just 12 days with said drink will make an amazing claim: in just 2 weeks with our new dietary drink, you can lose 20 pounds. Such a claim would radically change how you would see the world if it were true. It would mean you could eat anything you want, forgo all exercise and for just \$15.99 a week in dietary drinks, you could still maintain a beach body. However, such a claim does not match our current narrative about the universe; we may

²⁰ Manjit Kumar. *Quantum: Einstein, Bohr, and the Great Debate about the Nature of Reality* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

²¹ Louise STORY. "Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Now Likely to See an Ad." *The New York Times*. January 14, 2007. Accessed October 22, 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/15/business/media/15everywhere.html?pagewanted=all&r=0..>

²² Steven Barrie-Anthony. "Spiritual but Not Religious: A Rising, Misunderstood Voting Bloc." *The Atlantic*. January 14, 2014. Accessed October 22, 2014. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/spiritual-but-not-religious-a-rising-misunderstood-voting-bloc/283000/>.

wish it were true, but our experience tells us that it is not. For some, the photograph provided by the advertisement is enough to convince them that their world view is wrong, or perhaps their personal worldview has always held that such a dietary drink must exist. For most people, however, there will be very little that can be done to convince them that the advertisement can be taken at face value. Consider then, how radically this scenario would change if five of your most obese friends were to purchase this dietary drink, and two weeks later they were your thinnest friends? How would you reconcile a scientific study that denounces the claims of the energy drink with the sudden thinness of your five obese friends? For post-literates, social proof has become the prime new litmus test for reality.

Modern research on unbelievers confirms this. The Barna Group reported: “The primary reason outsiders feel hostile towards Christians, and especially conservative Christians, is not because of any particular theological perspective. What they react negatively to is our ‘swagger,’ how we go about things and the sense of self-importance we project.” Observed hypocrisy has been cited again and again by unbelievers as their primary reason for their unbelief. A Barna Group study of unbelievers aged 16–29 shows that 85% of unbelievers surveyed described Christians as “hypocritical — saying one thing, doing another,” this even in spite of 76% also saying that Christianity “has good values and principles.” For people in a digital culture of communication, your behavior and attitude on Facebook is just as important or more even important than the Christian messages you occasionally post. An unbeliever who sees your Christian testimony in word but observes as you viciously attack or berate others on Facebook or in person will reject your belief in the same way they reject other marketing messages that are “too good to be true.”

Identity

The missiological task must always return to the question of our identity before it can answer how we are to reach out to others. To answer what the Church will look like in the uncertain future, we need only answer the question of what and who the Church is in its essence. First, it is worth defining once again what the Church is. As Lutherans, we understand the Church as being the assembly of those who have been redeemed by Christ’s blood, washed and reborn in His Baptism and who receive His gifts through the Lord’s Supper and the preaching of the Word. As

Lutherans, we share the same confession as the apostles and the reformers as expressed in the Book of Concord. The apostle Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ — many members with only one head. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church, her Bridegroom and the center of everything. If Christ is not at the center of the Church, it can no longer be the Church. The body cannot survive without its head.

Therefore, even though it may be obvious, **my first suggestion for the Church in the post-literate, digital age we find ourselves in is simply to let Christ be first in everything.** Anything that we say or do with whatever technologies may come must be subject to this one rule, that in all things Christ might have the pre-eminence. Any attempt to guide the Church that does not “fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2) and in whom we “live, move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28) will be met with disaster. It is only through Christ’s grace that we are saved, and the mission and Church belong only to Him. We must renew our focus on Christology to reach this day and age.

Only with Christ as the established and unquestioned head of the Church can we look at the three types of expressions of our faith as described by the recent Synod emphasis. The concept is based on three Greek words: μαρτυρία (Witness), διακονία (Mercy) and κοινωνία (Life Together). Each of the words describes one of the roles of the Church, namely confessing the risen Christ through words and expressions of faith, showing God’s love and mercy to others through good works and being a part of the body of Christ through Word and Sacrament communities.

For the post-literate, words and expression of truth are important, and doing so in ways that make sense in their culture are vital. But another important aspect of communicating the Gospel to this generation is demonstrating that this faith is authentic. As children of the age of advertising, they will determine the truth of Christianity as much through their experiences with Christians as the words that describe the Gospel. Without a unified testimony of witness, mercy and life together, we risk falling into the same trap as many Christians in focusing so much on our words we lose our focus on living it out as well. Although the main emphasis of this discussion is communication of the Gospel, to emphasize this very point, I will leave “Witness” until last, as only in light of the other two will the testimony of the Church be effective.

The apostle John writes: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16–17).

Let this be our second guideline in bringing the Gospel into the digital age. **We should love one another because He first loved us.** The Christian cannot do good works or have compassion on others unless he himself has first received God’s unfathomable mercy. Through the Holy Spirit, we call out, “Lord, have mercy!” and He does! As Christians justified through Christ’s blood and made new in the waters of Baptism, we now have the freedom and capacity to show love and mercy to others. So, how should we behave within this networked, technological world? We behave no differently than how Jesus Christ Himself commanded us: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16).

We are called as Christians to be a light in the darkness. We cannot hide that light away from this new society that is being plunged even more deeply into darkness with every passing hour! Christians should be known across the world for their love toward the disenfranchised and poor, for other Christians and for the lost, even for our enemies. Unfortunately our reputation across the world right now is based on the often vicious battles we fight with other Christians and with unbelievers about countless issues. This is not to say that the Church should not take a stand on politically charged issues like abortion or homosexuality, but such communication must be bathed in the love and forgiveness that we ourselves have received. All too often our internal arguments have spilled out onto the Internet. Lutherans tear each other apart on blogs and Facebook over doctrinal or personal issues, while the world quietly sits by and observes us ignore the needs of our neighbor while demeaning our brother. Let us always remember to address these issues between one another in love and privacy, and to put others before ourselves in everything we do, following Christ’s example.

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all

partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17).

Therefore, a third guideline for the Church in the digital era is to remember our fellowship as a body of believers bound together through Christ. None of us is an island; we have always been a part of a social network, the one body of Jesus Christ. This body comes together around the Word and the Sacraments through the Divine Service and through community activities of service and stewardship. The sacramental life of the Church is a radical departure from the secular meta-narrative.

The digital age is increasingly characterized by its isolating characteristics. The Church is called to be in union, despite differences in age, economic status, political affiliation or past; we are all one in Christ. We cannot have a youth church, an elderly church and an “online” church; there can only be one Church. This is an incredible opportunity for the Church to stand out in this new age, as people seek community they can only truly find it in the fellowship of believers who gather around the Word and Sacraments. Let us become known for our community, for how we constantly are building one another up in love, and how we regularly receive Christ’s gifts together. Unity and face to face community must be a particular emphasis going forward. Perhaps it is time to retire the concept of compartmentalized ministries altogether.

The apostle John also writes, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us-- that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (1 John 1:1–4).

The final guideline is that **the Church must not lose focus on the historic and incarnational nature of our confession.** The Gospels themselves are social proof. We aren’t sharing a “clever story” or philosophy (2 Peter 1:16), but the testimony of eyewitnesses and people who were actually healed by Jesus’ own hand, heard His teaching with their own ears and continued to pass down this “tradition” generation after generation. All of our previous faithful confessions — the creeds, the Book of Concord and even our modern expressions insofar as they reflect

revealed Scripture — are built on the testimony of those who have seen and heard and touched. Our “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) points to Christ Himself as our eyewitness to the kingdom of Heaven and to the Father (John 1:18, John 6:46). We would do well not to forget the immense value of this for post-literates.

Only in the light of this testimony about Jesus Christ will our works and fellowship together make any sense to the unbeliever. How can they believe in that which they have not heard? Faith comes by hearing, and today, hearing may come through seeing, touching and experiencing. Let us boldly proclaim the same Gospel as those who went before us to this new generation! Evangelism to post-literates must take on the character of those disciples in Acts 4: “For we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”

It can seem that only those churches with the weakest understanding of biblical truth are engaging this new society. As Lutherans, we have a profound responsibility to take up this challenge. We have proven that we can express what we believe in the literate age through the Book of Concord, but could we express what we believe, teach and confess in the 140 characters of a tweet? Do we not have anything worth saying to these new generations who process and receive their information through story, networks and multimedia and not through books and treatises? Worse still, are we instead damaging our message through our current use (or abuse) of that same social media?

Orthodox Lutheranism should be uniquely positioned and able to answer this challenge. Our theology is hands-down the simplest and clearest way of the truth of Scripture. We are indeed facing a crisis as a church if we cannot conceive how to express our rich theology in digital ways. It is time for us to answer the pointed question of Malcolm Boyd: “Do the mass media represent simply vulgarization, popularization, an area of mounting confusion with which you cannot cope? Is your theology not applicable to this major crisis in Christian life and communication?”²³

Post-literate Christians and unbelievers are seeking a biblical confession of the faith in their own language and culture, a meta-narrative with which to understand their own life and purpose. In the midst of the hurried “twaddle” denounced by Kierkegaard, Lutherans are faced with a question.

#silence?

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²³ Boyd, Malcolm. *Crisis in Communication: a Christian Examination of the Mass Media* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957.