



What Hath God Wrought?

Apparently, some who lived by *Lost* cowered in mortal fear a few weekends ago lest a well-meaning friend (or a malicious one) tweet, text, or e-mail with the outcome of the final episode before they had a chance to view it for themselves. The danger of social networking!

I could put on my curmudgeonly editor's hat at this point (it comes with the job) and argue "that's what you get" for assuming that something like a fictional TV series matters in real life. But, I suppose, once the lines between real life and virtual life have been blurred as radically as they now have, it becomes harder to figure out which side of the screen we live on (or in). On the one hand, we have "reality TV," where "real" folks display their manipulated and choreographed episodes on the screen; and on the other, we have folks rushing home from an actual event to see it on TV, since somehow that validates their experience, making it "real."

"What hath God wrought?" indeed! Change is inevitable, but all change is certainly not progress. And speed increases—for everything we do, it seems—but does it matter how fast we get there if we are not sure where we are going?

Too curmudgeonly, I suppose. Instant communication didn't start with the text message, but it did, in fact, start in quite recent historical memory with Samuel F. B. Morse's invention of the telegraph, demonstrated on May 24, 1844, when Morse sent his famous "What hath God wrought" message from Washington, DC, to his associate in Baltimore, forty miles away. As Daniel Walker Howe writes:

The invention they had demonstrated was destined to change the world. For thousands of years messages had been limited by the speed with which messengers could travel and the distance at which eyes could see signals such as flags or smoke. Neither Alexander the Great nor Benjamin Franklin (America's first postmaster general) two thousand years later knew anything faster than a galloping horse.¹

The possibility of instant communication has transformed the world; and the process continues: telegraph, telephone, radio, TV, computers, texts and tweets—oxymoronically, "instantaneous" seems to get faster and faster, or at least more and more accessible, more and more democratic. And everything changes.

Among other things, such accessible communication produces a social phenomenon like the last episode of *Lost*. But e-connections didn't invent such things. Witness the appearance of the last book in the Harry Potter series in 2007, in which

¹Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 1.

case, our family, too, rushed to read the book before anyone told us how it came out. But there the feared “networking” was related to talking to the neighbor or going to school rather than receiving a text message. To be sure, some folks were already texting in 2007, but “everybody” was not, so our world was “safer” from the intrusion of spoilers.

More ominous widespread social crazes are not new, either—from the witch trials in seventeenth-century Salem to the phenomenon of otherwise apparently sane people worried about the end of the world marked by the end of the Mayan calendar in 2012. Orson Welles’s 1938 *Mercury Theatre on the Air* radio broadcast of the Martian invasion depicted by H. G. Wells in his *War of the Worlds* as though it were a present news event brought many to near hysteria—including, once more, members of my own family.² The difference, though, is that involvement in the Salem trials was limited to those in the immediate area; the *Mercury Theatre* phenomenon was expanded to those who happened to have their radios tuned to the broadcast; but the Mayan calendar thing is flung worldwide by means of the Internet. More people can get more crazy more quickly. Or, on the other hand, more people can get incredibly valuable information and significant social contact—not only more quickly, but get it at all. It simply wasn’t available just a few years ago.

So, the Preacher is both right and wrong when he says, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). Humans then and now will be caught up in fads and crazes; humans then and now will seek validation and community; but the social networks that enable such things have expanded exponentially, and that really does change things.

What the church will make of all this is explored in the articles in this issue. Christian biblical theology will bring to this conversation the insistence that a real God really enters the real world with the real presence of God’s real son—nothing virtual in any of that. But then what happens when God’s real people invent virtual worlds? What place is there in the ether and the airwaves for a God of smoke and fire, flesh and blood? We can explore this, I think, without fear, because the biblical promises eventually trump the Preacher’s cynicism. “I am about to do a new thing,” says God (Isa 43:19); and again, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:7). Apparently, God will be able to handle things in the brave new world of human making—though, with faith in God and insights from what God has been up to all along, God’s followers might find themselves called to have an influence on the shape of that new world—to help change become progress, after all.

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²The broadcast is available online at <http://www.mercurytheatre.info> (accessed 24 May 2010).