



## E-vangelism: At All Times and in All Places?

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I was recently arranging a meeting with a young friend who, like many twenty-somethings, actively engages in social media interaction throughout each day. I e-mailed him a time and a place to meet. He replied, “Like as in a face-to-face meeting? Dang, guess I better be there!” When we met at a coffee shop, he set his cell phone on the table and ignored it while we visited. Picking it back up as we prepared to leave, he observed that during that time dozens of text messages, Facebook updates, tweets, and headlines from around the world had all been delivered to his cell phone—and the bottom thirty to forty entries were practically like “old news” compared to the most recent dozen, which included several conversations with multiple entries. Clearly, cell phone companies have responded effectively to the engrossing phenomenon of Internet communication, facilitating and enhancing our capacity to be engaged at all times and in all places.

After reading a religious article on the web, I noticed icons at the bottom of the webpage that gave readers the opportunity to share the article via e-mail or by using these common social media forums: Facebook, Digg, Twitter, LinkedIn, Buzz, Reddit, StumbleUpon, Fark, Delicious, and Newsvine. An alternative link opened 263 *other* online aggregation sites where information is shared and pithy responses garnered. Originally, the Internet functioned as a vast superhighway for disseminating information from a webmaster through a website to the Internet

*If the Internet is where the people are, it must be where the church is also. The Internet is our “Athens” online, which we cannot ignore, just as Paul did not ignore those gathered on Mars Hill.*

user; this has been identified as Web 1.0. Today, the Internet has become a rapidly expanding culture of social interaction, collaborative networks, and interoperability; this is known as Web 2.0. The Internet is therefore evolving from a *delivery system* into a *social space* that people inhabit and where they not only share information and conduct e-commerce, but also engage in self-expression, communication, networking, and entertainment.

This article explores the possibilities for engaging in Internet evangelism, or e-vangelism. Might we discern God's evangelism activity on the Internet, and, if so, how might an evangelizing church participate online with God's activity there? First, evangelism will be defined in light of God's mission, with e-vangelism as its specific Internet permutation. That will provide the framework for exploring the potential for e-vangelism from three perspectives: imagination, innovation, and implications. Three corresponding biblical pathways will provide the entry points into this social space for e-vangelism: the path for the sower of seeds (Matt 13:1–23), the highway traversed by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), and the road to Emmaus on Easter evening (Luke 24:13–35).

#### EVANGELISM: GOD'S TRINITARIAN MISSION

There are many definitions of *evangelism*. David Bosch places the historical diversity of those definitions on a continuum of six positions that range from the church's activities to save souls from eternal damnation to its political efforts to conform societal structures to the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup> This range aptly demonstrates the widely diverse and often conflicted stances held historically by the church, some viewing evangelism as predominantly spiritual while others see it as chiefly humanitarian. The twentieth century, once dubbed the "Christian Century," began with evangelistic fervor to save the entire world and entertained articulate debate across this spectrum of differing perspectives and agendas over its tumultuous one hundred years.

Theologically, evangelism is much more than an ecclesial agenda.<sup>2</sup> According to John Bowen's refreshing *Evangelism for "Normal" People*, "Evangelism at its core is God coming after us, even at our very worst, to invite us to come home."<sup>3</sup> It has something to do with the coming of the kingdom of God, which, as Martin Luther asserted in his own time of ecclesial critique and uncertainty, comes quite on its own.<sup>4</sup> William Abraham identifies evangelism as initiation into the kingdom of God for the first time, shifting the focus from churchly evangelistic activities

<sup>1</sup>David J. Bosch, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today," in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 4–6.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storeyed Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 129–131.

<sup>3</sup>John P. Bowen, *Evangelism For "Normal" People: Good News for Those Looking for a Fresh Approach* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 28.

<sup>4</sup>See Luther's definition to the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer in Luther's *Small Catechism*.

(specifically proclamation, church growth, conversion, witness, and discipleship) to initiation into “the sweep of God’s action in Christ and in the Holy Spirit...a theocentric horizon where the focus is on the majestic and awesome activity of a Trinitarian God.”<sup>5</sup> The force of Abraham’s contribution is a theological shift in focus to God’s triune mission of ushering us into God’s transformative kingdom, which is both our present reality and eschatological hope. Christ crucified and risen, by the power of the Spirit, continues to bring us into God’s kingdom—and we are compelled to participate wherever possible in that transformative work.

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William Abraham’s trinitarian focus on evangelism acknowledges that initiation involves a “complex web of reality...within the dramatic action of God that is manifest in Christ and fueled by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> That complexity envisions four levels of agency: primarily the triune God, followed by the church, the evangelist, and the person(s) evangelized. Abraham’s definition is a useful entry point into the complexity of the World Wide Web, offering us the perspective of seeing God at work through these multiple levels of expression and participation on the Internet. This article focuses specifically on the first and second agents of evangelism, the Triune God and the church, as we think particularly about the implications for Christian congregational ministry. As the church is catapulted from its previously assumed place of cultural authority within Christendom, we find we are inexperienced, hesitant, and even reluctant about emerging from the privacy of modernity and the safety of the institutional church to step into the complex public sphere of late- or postmodernity with the Christian message. That world, however, is right before us online, as we explore e-vangelism as the Internet potential for sharing the gospel.

The evolution of the Internet from just a delivery system for information to a space also for social interaction creates an environment for orienting our understanding of evangelism within the social life and mission of God. This understanding of God’s life and mission is based upon the notion of *perichoresis*, an interpretation of the relationships among the divine persons within the Trinity that has been retrieved from the Eastern church.<sup>7</sup> Perichoresis is an ancient Greek word

<sup>5</sup>William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 98.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 103–104.

<sup>7</sup>For a concise discussion of this interpretation of the Trinity, retrieved from the Eastern Christian church, see Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” in *Trinity, Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000) 111–125.

that originated in the everyday sharing of mutual burdens and joys within neighborhoods of the ancient world.<sup>8</sup> When used to describe the relations among the Trinitarian community, “The very special suggestion of perichoresis is that the divine persons are ‘habitable’ for one another, giving one another open life-space for their mutual indwelling. Each person is indwelling and room-giving at the same time.”<sup>9</sup> Within the Trinity, divine life is open and circulating, fulfilling for each and for all, and infusing human beings with this same life-giving mutuality and reciprocity.

Perichoresis, so defined, brilliantly links the persons of the Trinity together as a community in mutually reciprocal fellowship with one another. This shapes and orients the church in like fashion toward the world. The perichoretic Trinity, in contrast to the Western logic of hierarchical monotheism, provides a formative vision for a nonhierarchical and noninstrumental approach to evangelism. When the church engages in evangelism, it is attending to the longings and yearnings of God for us. It participates in God’s Trinitarian mission to love and save the world through initiation into the kingdom of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

#### E-VANGELISM IN CONTEXT

The missionary opportunities for e-vangelism are readily apparent on blogs, websites, Facebook walls, and reader responses posted with news items. People express curiosity and anger; they’ll post shockingly intimate information or pose probingly painful questions. They flagrantly denounce basics of Christian faith (“I don’t believe Jesus!”), strip Christian festivals of their meaning (“I hereby declare it is no longer Easter but International Zombie Day”), disparage “Churchianity,” and repudiate “the whole ghetto of Christian stuff.” On a more poignant note, one young woman wrote on her website regarding the God-sized hole within the human heart (an image credited to seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal):

But there are still times when I think I would like a religion, something to inflate inside my being for when life gets too noisy; something to stop my shoulders from collapsing forward. Like the wooden pegs children play with, I wonder if I will succeed in finding the right fit for my god-shaped hole or if it’s just a place for the wind to blow through.<sup>10</sup>

Web 2.0 is a gathering space of people with diverse voices, many often unheard in the church and unheeded by the church. Indeed, there is massive promulgation of unchecked, uninformed, and unverifiable assertions of reality or truth. Yet, even these are avenues for hearing people in our culture. They help us observe

<sup>8</sup>Gary M. Simpson, “Ecclesial Communion, God’s Publicity, and Global Citizenship,” in *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire: Trinitarian Reflections*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2007) 227–228.

<sup>9</sup>Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 114.

<sup>10</sup>Anna Krien, at <http://www.annakrien.com/journalism4.html> (accessed 3 May 2010).

what people around us are noticing and how they are responding to their world, with clues to their deeper searchings, strugglings, and perspectives on life.

In the apostolic spirit of St. Paul, I am suggesting that the Internet is a space for the church to inhabit as part of our e-vangelism mission in the world. As Paul boldly encountered diverse spiritual perspectives on Mars Hill, so we cannot ignore the “Athens” online today. Paul used all the resources of his time in his evangelism efforts, and the Internet is one of the avenues available to us in spreading the gospel. We now turn to this rich potential.

#### THE PATH OF THE SOWER—IMAGINATION FOR E-VANGELISM

The first biblical entry point into the Internet social space is the path of the Sower, who flings seeds so exuberantly and extravagantly that the seeds fall not only on good soil but on the path, rocky ground, and thorns (Matt 13:1–23). The good seed is far-flung, into a variety of circumstances that yield differing responses. The Internet is one such world, so replete with possibilities that we might see it as the parable of the Sower in the extreme. It is a highly complex environment that pushes beyond boundaries, resists compartmentalization, and provides fodder for every possible religious expression. Many Internet spaces are freely accessed by an anonymous global community. The potential reach of the good news has never been greater.

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Social media provide the church an opportunity to develop new imagination for how God might be at work within this complexity and how we might participate in God’s mission through our own Internet activity. Some congregations are beginning to develop an imagination for using the Internet, often through such activities as website development and updating member listservs for electronic-newsletter distribution, frequently dedicated to disseminating church information. The evolution of Web 2.0 challenges the church to develop an even greater imagination for e-vangelism, moving from disseminating church information to social networking and interactive possibilities that might participate in God’s faithful work to initiate people into the kingdom. This moves us beyond institutionalizing our Internet usage for in-house informational and programmatic purposes, to creating an open and inviting environment for mutually dwelling within the transformative presence of the Trinity.

It is difficult to measure where, to whom, and into what circumstances the seeds of the kingdom are flung through the Internet. This is a vivid reminder that we are not in control of the word but are participating in God’s work, by the power

of the Holy Spirit. Our e-vangelism imagination is not focused on ourselves and our members but on those who have not yet been incorporated into Christian communities. This requires that we abandon instrumentalized views of evangelism in which the church attempts to dictate, legislate, and evaluate responses to the gospel. Like the divine Sower, we are truly casting seeds upon many soils and, in doing so, our own imagination for God's activity in the world is broadened and challenged.

#### THE GOOD SAMARITAN HIGHWAY—INNOVATION IN E-VANGELISM

The second biblical entry into our e-vangelism inquiry is the route taken by the Good Samaritan. He stumbled upon a badly wounded man, was moved with compassion, and the Bible says, "He went to him" (Luke 10:34). Being attentive to his surroundings altered the course for the Good Samaritan and, as a result, for the man lying half-dead by the side of the road. As the Internet weaves our path through cyberspace, we are compelled to respond to those who seem to be lying spiritually at the side of the road, calling out for something—for an opportunity for self-expression, for an audience, and, from the perspective of faith, for the good news.

Like the Good Samaritan, we might be observant of our online surroundings, listen compassionately to those we encounter there, and then "go" to them in innovative ways that make creative use of Internet potential. Clearly, the Internet has its problems, and e-vangelism has serious limitations. Internet social networking is indirect and impersonal in significant ways, lacking many of the connections that shape human community. Nevertheless, it is one potentially powerful venue for "going to" God's people with the gospel.

Congregations are becoming innovative about engaging the public through Facebook conversations, connecting them to events, and creatively visiting with them through YouTube videos. Some pastors are soliciting real-time feedback during sermon preparation, posting sermons with opportunities to respond, providing links to religious articles with, again, response mechanisms. One congregation's website has created an online prayer community that weekly allows anyone to post their first name, identify their prayer requests from a drop-down menu, and optionally send a private message to the pastor. Another congregation has extended face-to-face Bible studies through Facebook conversations accessible to anyone. Social media are about relating to people, and they provide limitless opportunities for congregations to develop innovative ways to do more than disseminate information to members.

Massive numbers of people "inhabit" Internet space. Were the church to eschew Internet e-vangelism, that might be "telling" in itself. It potentially sends a message to the culture that, as is often alleged, the church is not relevant, but chooses to pass by on the other side, is more self-absorbed than compassionate, and is ill equipped to address complex issues or to encounter the real plights in

which people find themselves. Like the Good Samaritan, the church needs to direct its own institutional path to respond to God's people, and one way is through innovative e-vangelism.

#### THE ROAD TO EMMAUS—THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF E-VANGELISM

Our final biblical road is the one taken by two travelers to Emmaus on the evening of Jesus' resurrection. When he joins them, the risen Christ inquires of the events in Jerusalem that have made them so demonstrably sad. "What things?" he asks, giving them the opportunity to tell their version of his own story (Luke 24:19). He listens, engages, and journeys with them into a dialogical overview of Scriptures that compelled them to urge him, as the evening drew near, "Stay with us" (Luke 24:29). He had made room for their story; they made room for him at their table. And then the risen Christ was revealed to them in the breaking of bread.

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Knowing the news is not all that matters along this road; it is the encounter with the risen Christ that transforms lives. I interviewed several savvy participants in social media, and they had much to say—until I asked them to tell me about how the Internet helped someone develop a relationship with Jesus. Silence. The Internet has capacity to introduce and invite, be innovative and imaginative, but eventually the point of e-vangelism is initiation into the kingdom, and the congregation is the primary setting in which the Holy Spirit creates encounters with the risen Christ through the proclamation of the word, the mystery of the sacraments, and human relationships.<sup>11</sup>

E-vangelism at all times and in all places ultimately ushers people beyond virtual community to the in-the-flesh community where Christ is known today also in the breaking of bread, where the body of Christ is enfleshed in human community, and where praise of God shapes our lives. As we pray in the Preface to Holy Communion, "It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you."<sup>12</sup> In a variety of ways, Internet voices like those of the disciples on the road to Emmaus are essentially calling for our continued presence. Effective e-vangelism acknowledges that God is at work in connections made through social media, as the church seeks ways to participate in that divine activity by finding new ways to open its heart and its doors to God's people.

The discussion along the road to Emmaus reminds us that evangelism in-

<sup>11</sup>Richard H. Bliese and Craig Van Gelder, *The Evangelizing Church: A Lutheran Contribution* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005) 135.

<sup>12</sup>*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 108.

volves telling the story of Jesus. To do that, we need to *know* the story—and how it relates to the issues God’s people raise in their Internet postings, tweets, and blogs. We were made to tell God’s story, and in many respects have lost *our* way. When we just had to show up in church, when we assumed faith among our neighbors, when we could rely on births to grow the church, then we didn’t have to verbally address the complexities, paradoxes, challenges, even contradictions of the faith perceived by outsiders, strangers, and unbelievers. In sounding the depths of our faith in search of appropriate responses to the perspectives we encounter online, we are given opportunities to regain our footing for telling God’s story along life’s pathways. In the process, we ourselves will grow, because, as William Abraham asserts, “In evangelizing, the church itself is reevangelized.”<sup>13</sup>

#### AT ALL TIMES AND IN ALL PLACES

A “network church” is emerging that decenters things religious from traditional “mainframe church,” as people pursue religion in whatever way they choose with no ecclesial or spatial boundaries. As one Internet blogger stated, “People are feeding themselves spiritually where they find nourishment—and for many, it’s on the Internet rather than in congregations.” While there are many critiques the church might proffer about this state of affairs, we are called to go where God’s people gather—and the Internet is one such gathering space today, albeit virtual, with the familiarity that the *Cheers* bar or Central Perk previously gave TV audiences. Habitual Internet users do not differentiate among the various online spaces, but view the Internet as an undifferentiated, integrated space where they “hang out” whenever possible.

The notion of online e-vangelism dispels the old notions of a lone, charismatic evangelist. It dispels the notion that one leader’s interpretations of Scripture and faith are the only voice someone needs and heeds. It humbles us into realizing that we need to be able to articulate what we know—and invites us to know Christ more deeply if we are going to speak more deeply of what we know. It is an occasion to center less on ourselves and our own formulations and truly to encounter the words and thoughts of others. Online, each person has the space and time to say what’s on their minds. This is, unfortunately, too often not the case in our churches. We cannot thwart, interrupt, override someone’s self-expression online. Perhaps, online, we might become more authentic listeners.

A change of self-perception is needed, in order for the church to greet those surfing the net as fellow travelers on an Internet faith highway. David Bosch suggests that, with bold humility, we evangelize as witnesses, envoys of peace, and ambassadors of the Servant Lord.<sup>14</sup> Lorraine, well into her eighties, had been the treasurer for a little rural congregation for over twenty years. Attendance and fi-

<sup>13</sup>Abraham, *Logic of Evangelism*, 170.

<sup>14</sup>David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 489.

nances were dwindling, Ladies Aid meetings were sparse, youth were moving away and taking the future with them, high schoolers weren't coming to church after confirmation. The church council was discussing the problems. Someone said, "You know why those kids aren't in church on Sunday mornings? It's because they're down at the bars on Saturday nights!" Lorraine brightened, "Well, you know what we need to do, then?" The council waited expectantly. "We need to get our behinds down to the bars!"

Similarly, the church might faithfully inhabit the social media sites where people are hanging out and blogging their hopes and hurts, responding to news both banal and significant, texting and shopping, wandering and surfing. There, we might journey with them, listen to them, learn with them, and become e-vangelized together by the Triune God.

One young net surfer observed that people actually make time and space in their lives for the multiple layers of communication and connection, information and entertainment of social media. At the same time, many have an empty space, that God-sized hole in their hearts. As the blogger noted earlier, that God-sized hole is indeed a place for the wind to blow through. However, it is not a frivolous, directionless air. It is the e-vangelizing wind of the Holy Spirit, faithfully blowing at all times and in all places. ☩

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