

THE BIBLE IN THE DIGITAL SPACE

BY REV MARK BROWN • July 2009

Recently appearing in a newspaper in New Zealand was an advert encouraging people to come to church to listen to a preaching series entitled: The Bible: God's Facebook. Now without knowing what they shared, the title all the same intrigues me. How precisely is the Bible, the grand story

of God's salvation of His people, in anyway similar to a social network site? Is it perhaps that both expose the human story, the pain, the rebellion, the offer of reconciliation? Is the Bible an agglomeration of our stories, connected and shared? I am not so sure.



Or perhaps they might suggest that people disconnect from Facebook and connect with the Bible? Stop wasting your time on Facebook and start investing your time with the Word of God. Either way, the intention of the advert is to encourage people to come to church, not for church itself, but so as to

And suddenly we are joined in the room by that perennial question, ‘How do we encourage people to come to church?’

Now there are two broad approaches to answering this question as I see it:

The first is that we do all we can to encourage people to come to us.

We review how we do church, from the style of the worship to the programme mix throughout the week, to how we are perceived in the community.

Studies in Australia⁴ and the US⁵ suggest three main reasons why people avoid church:

1. Its boring and unfulfilling
2. They don't have time and prefer to do other things, and
3. They believe that what is shared at church is plain weird

Grace Davie argues that in Britain the data indicates that believing and belonging have become increasingly separated. While Christian “belonging” has clearly declined, Christian beliefs nonetheless persist.⁶

So with this first approach we valiantly seek to market church as a place where belonging connects with belief, where a worship service or whatever experience of church one may have, is engaging, attractive and relevant. And in part a number of churches are on this path.

The second approach is quite different, in asking, ‘How do we encourage people to come to church?’ I suggest we encourage people to come to church by not encouraging them to come to church.

Rather than expecting people to come to us, we go to them.

We travel into their environment immersing ourselves in their milieu, cuddling up to the Zeitgeist, perhaps learning a completely new ‘language’. And then once we appreciate and understand the environment, we then seek to create an experience of church absolutely particular to that culture. A customised church.

So clearly church as a concept must be much more than a physical building. In this I am informed by article 19 of the Anglican Church's 39 Articles entitled Of the Church which reads,

learn about this marvellous ‘best seller’ the Bible.

And that is a cause very close to my heart. As CEO of Bible Society New Zealand I am heavily involved in encouraging people to engage with the Bible. I am on record for stating that the appallingly low Bible engagement rates amongst western Christians is a crisis facing the church. Research conducted by Bible Society New Zealand showed that only 11% of Christians read their Bible daily with 24% reading it at least once in a month. The research also reported that only 53% of Christians stated the Bible influenced their lives and 60% said they rarely or never discuss the teachings of the Bible with others. This is echoed in the UK with very recent research conducted by Rev Brian Brown on behalf of CODEC, St John's College Durham University, which shows that 18% of the general population have read their Bible in the last week and only 31% said that the Bible was significant in their lives now.¹

The question is, how do we attend to this crisis? Well we found that the more you go to church, the more church activities you are involved in, the more you will be influenced by, discuss and regularly read the Bible.

So the church behind the advert is onto something!

In its simplest form our research displayed that one way to encourage more people to engage with the Scriptures is by encouraging them to actively participate in a church community.

And herein lies the problem.

We discovered that only 30% of Christians attend church at least once a week or more frequently.² And this is matched in the UK where the figure is 28%.³

So the vast majority of professing Christians don't grace the doors of church in any expression, shape or form.

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.⁷

When it talks of congregation, it is not referring to a building but to a gathering of people, the ecclesia who come together to proclaim the Word of God and administer the Sacraments. Can I say how pleased am I that my topic isn't the 'Sacraments in the Digital Space'! I will leave that difficult area to another occasion.⁸

And yet buildings may well manifest in some form within this new environment, it is not to discount it, but rather to liberate somewhat our understanding of 'church'.

So as well as being invitational in our attempts to encourage more people into church, I believe we also need to be incarnational, that of bringing an experience of the transcendent God into perhaps a completely new environment.

So we encourage Bible engagement through a more active church involvement within this incarnational model, as well as taking full advantage of whatever communication channels are available within this contemporary environment.

And the particular environment I want to address today is the Digital Space, the internet.

In just a short period of time the net has grown to around 35 billion pages⁹ with some 1.6 billion people using it.¹⁰

There are around 55 trillion links between all the web pages in the world.¹¹

Every day there are some 100 billion mouse clicks made.¹²

Every second, 2 million emails are sent.¹³

Every two seconds in terms of data size, the equivalent of the Library of Congress, the largest library in the world, is moving across the web.¹⁴

The internet is massive and growing at an extraordinary rate. It's predicted that this year more information will be created on the Web than in all previous years combined.¹⁵

And this phenomenal growth it isn't simply limited to western nations, with Africa as an example, experiencing more than 1,000% growth in net users in the past 8 years.¹⁶ There is also a big push happening at the moment to make available internet access for all people, including those in the two-thirds world, with such projects as the Google backed O3B network (The Other 3 Billion).¹⁷

Right now the global average of time adults spend online is 89 hours a month or around 3 hours a day.¹⁸

And then you hold against this amazing statistic, our research which displayed that a vast majority of people spend less than 30 minutes a day reading and reflecting on the Bible.

What if we were to move into this digital space and offer an experience of church, of the Bible in the language and culture of the digital environment?

How might this look?

Well first let me briefly map for you this digital space; I will consider this in terms of a number of significant shifts the massive internet growth is causing, the first being a shift from the importance of the collective to the power of the individual. The rallying cry of the digital generation is:

Just for me, wherever I am, however I want it, whenever I want it, preferably for free.

A life lived on my terms. I am an empowered consumer attracted to those products and experiences that fit my needs.

We are also seeing a shift from local to global:

With the internet I can interact with people, projects and products across the globe. And the language barrier is slowly dissolving with various near instantaneous translation services available. A couple of years ago I founded the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life,¹⁹ an attempt to be church within the virtual environment for people wherever they are, whatever their circumstance. Within six months we had a virtual Cathedral build and were holding services. Now each week there are 7 services, a Bible Study, a lively discussion group, plus hundreds of fellowship encounters. Those participating come from more than 20 nations, able to gather together, regardless of where they are located.



With this shift from the local to the global we have the capacity to be part of a global community with all the richness and challenges this brings.

We are also seeing a shift from corporations, governments and large institutions controlling information to being freely available.

This shift can be seen directly in the ascendancy of the “open source” movement which provides applications and other products for free and encourages people to develop the product moving forward. A good example is while Wikipedia has grown, sales of Encyclopaedia Britannica have plummeted. Now considerable questions exist around the quality of the information provided, but a healthy open source environment includes a robust editorial process.

And with the advent of powerful search engines and such applications as Twitter, information is only a mouse click away. Having instant access to information is shifting the balance of power from the supply side to the demand side.²⁰

This is a shift from a few creating content for the many to the many creating content for the few.

Everyone is a potential movie maker (YouTube); a potential author (blogging, self-publishing), a potential photographer (Flickr), and editor and contributor of knowledge (Wikipedia).

In this way information is no longer able to be completely controlled by an institution, whether a church or a corporation. With information so freely available, Van Wishard argues that people are empowered to ‘make up their own minds on an issue.’²¹

The role and power of the institution is diluted when people have direct access to information and also feel empowered to decide what is right amongst the various offerings. Gedicks and Hendrix²² describe this as, ‘cutting out the middleman for religious experience.’ (ibid.)

They argue that the church (middleman) is losing its ability to influence people, who are becoming part of network collectives, and are defining their spiritual experience independently of the church.

Michael Moynagh states that, ‘Church may connect with our more spiritual age if it offers not only a spiritual map, but the freedom for people to select the route most helpful to them’.²³

Scattered collaborative networks rather than centralized and hierarchical sets are the organizational system of the near future. The classic organizational pyramid is being turned upside down.²⁴

And this raises considerable questions around authority and control for the church.

How can we make sure Christianity is done well?

Should we expect Christians to read large chunks of scripture every day?

How could we preach the Word of God and administer sacraments, care for the poor, disciple Christians through a collaborative network system?

This collaborative network system is organic in its growth, disparate and multi-cultural in its membership, and capable of rapid change. This is clearly a huge challenge to the institutional church.

The massive internet growth is also causing a shift from information being communicated at prescribed times and through set channels to information being available any time, anywhere.

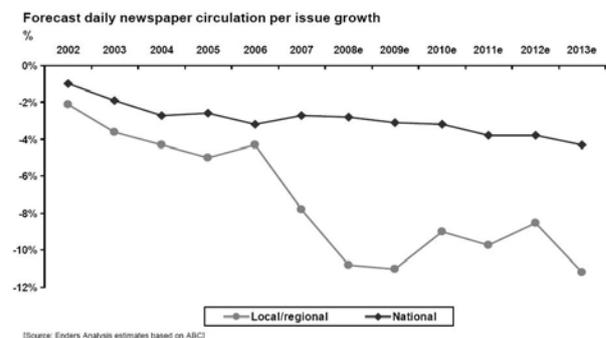
Ivan Seidenberg, states that, ‘..everything will be all media, all the time.’²⁵ The reality is that the internet never ‘turns off’ and with the growing number of regions with internet access, we can now be connected any time and just about anywhere.

A major piece of research by the Associated Press into the future of media highlights this well when it states that news consumers have a

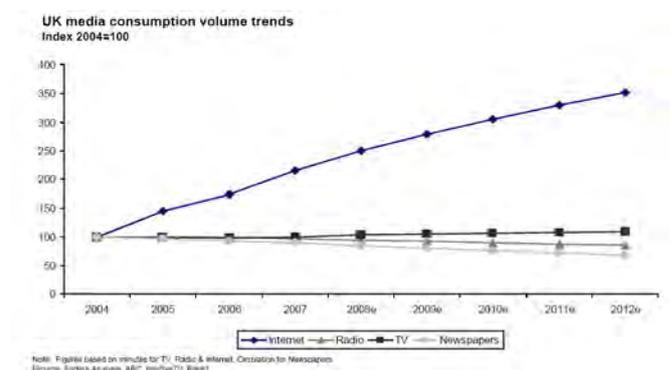
..ubiquity of news to select from at almost any time, from anywhere, on a variety of technologies and platforms—television, Internet, mobile devices, radio and more.²⁶

The expectation now is that the modern reporter needs to, ‘report what is happening, not what has happened.’(ibid.)

Evidence of this is the decline in newspaper circulation.²⁷



When compared to the growth in internet usage:²⁸



News stories don't wait for the usual editorial process; via such services as Twitter news spreads rapidly.

And with the growth of the internet has come a plethora of new ways of communicating, of being distracted. If you use at least seven devices and nine connectivity applications then you are part of what is called the hyper-connected generation.²⁹

With so many things demanding our attention we are experiencing what Linda Stone, calls 'Continuous Partial Attention', which Stone describes as being motivated by a desire not to miss anything. Stone notes,

..we feel most alive when we're connected, plugged in and in the know. We constantly scan for opportunities—activities or people—in any given moment. With every opportunity we ask, "What can I gain here?"³⁰

At Bible Society New Zealand in response to the appalling Bible engagement rates amongst Christians we wanted to find out, 'Why don't people read their Bible more often?' The overwhelming reason is that people are distracted, their attention drawn to other things as they scan their environment.

And the final shift to mention is the shift from face to face relationships only to including online relationships.

I have never met the chair of the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life leadership team in person, and yet I have worked closely with her for nearly two years. And this feels quite normal. There are those predicting that in the not too distant future we will have more virtual contacts whom we have never physically met, than those we have met.³¹

Noted social commentator Hugh Mackay states, 'the idea that human presence is necessary for people to communicate with each other has gone.'³² As alarming as this might seem, through applications like Facebook, it is more and more becoming the reality.

So I offer the challenge: that we inhabit this digital space, become part of the culture and learn the language of what Marc Prensky calls the, 'Digital Natives'³³ Those of us who have adopted technology later in life he describes as, 'Digital Immigrants' and like anyone immigrating to a new country, there is a need to learn.

So sit with some young people, these digital natives, and find out about this digital space. Join Facebook and Twitter, start reading blogs, and attend a service at the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life; be prepared to learn.

In Actes and Monuments, the history of the English church written by John Foxe, he celebrates the invention of the printing press, which he praises as a catalytic tool of the Reformation. Foxe states that print technology, is a "divine and miraculous" gift from God to the Protestant cause, an aid "to convince darknesse by lyght, error by truth, ignoraunce by learnynge."³⁴

Like the printing press, the web has the potential to become an extraordinary tool for the church in fulfilling its mission.

So how might the Bible be present in this digital space? I want to present three provocative predictions of how the web might influence the production, understanding and appreciation of the Bible. These are designed to stimulate conversation, although if you have money and would like to invest I would be happy to chat to you!

The first prediction is instant Bible translations.

There are 6,909 languages spoken in the world. 2,479 of them have all or part of the Bible. Of the 6,909 languages only 451 have a full Bible, this grew by 13 in the past year - very slow progress. And there is good reason for this, the translation process is exhaustive, taking a dedicated team a minimum of 12 years and sometimes 20+ years to complete the Bible. Across the globe, Bible Society is presently involved in 650 Bible translation projects.

We may see a day in the not too distant future when translation, whether written or spoken, is a near instantaneous process. So rather than 20 years for a full Bible translation, it takes 20 minutes.

Right now companies like Google have the grand plan of collating and indexing all information, so that it can be searched and referred to. An example is Google Books where their aim is to have a digital copy of every book, magazine etc.. on the planet, with the ability to search every word and image. There are now some 7 million books that have been digitized, with agreements made with more than 20,000 publishers and authors. They have also partnered with a number of University Libraries including Oxford Universities Bodleian Library.

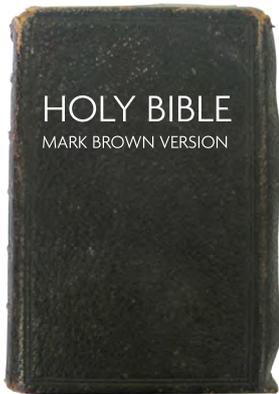
What if their vision included documenting each of the 6,909 language groups? The text, cultural nuances, idioms, and so on. And where there is only an oral language the spoken equivalent is documented.

Well this has started with the Google translate project which presently has some 34 language pairs. Their style of translation doesn't use a rule based approach, with emphasis on grammar etc.. but they, 'feed the computer billions of words of text, both monolingual text in the target language, and aligned text consisting of examples of human translations between the languages. Google then applies statistical learning techniques to build a translation model.'³⁵

So in a similar way, someone like Google might exhaustively document each of those 6,909 languages to the point where a translation of the complete Bible is possible at the press of a button. Clearly the technology is in its infancy, but it is rapidly improving each day.

The second prediction is Personalised Translation.

With the emphasis on the individual, we may see the day when we are able to translate a Bible specifically just for you. A personal profile would be built up through mapping genetic dispositions, such as the service offered by 23andMe,³⁶ where for US\$399 you can find out which health issues you're disposed to and what your genetic ancestry is.



The personal profile would include complete analysis of your online behaviour, the photos you post, the photos you view, the websites you visit, your Facebook status bar entries, your online shopping habits... all collated towards a comprehensive personal profile. And then from this is created a translation that is unique to you.

Right now there are more than 250 different translations and editions of the Bible in English. Many are particular to broad categories such as the backpackers Bible, the surfers Bible, the pink fluffy Bible (my daughters favourite), this variety exists in part to sell more Bibles, but also to encourage Bible reading. It is possible that these categories could greatly reduce to a membership of 1 – me. A Bible for each of us which, may well assist in promoting Bible engagement.

As a very simple example, imagine the genetic analysis showed that John was disposed to depression and had a deep appreciation of the ocean. With this profile information collated a Bible could be created online for John, where passages that account for his melancholic nature are emphasised, perhaps with associated study material, and the art work takes into account his love of the ocean.

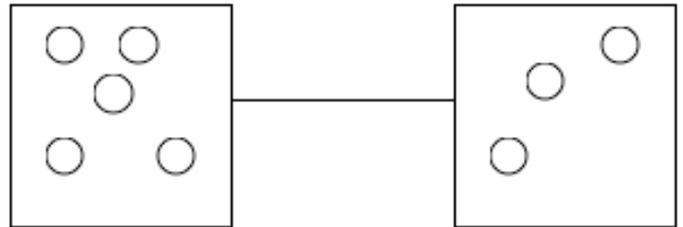
The third and final prediction is the Semantic Bible.

Right now the Web works through linking pages, one page links to another page and so on. The next stage is the Semantic Web where data within the pages is linked rather than pages themselves. The semantic web concept was created by Tim Berners-Lee, who 20 years ago also invented the World Wide Web. Tim describes the Semantic Web as, 'not a separate Web but an extension of the current one, in which information is given well-defined meaning, better enabling computers and people to work in cooperation.'³⁷

Let's say that the present Web is like a room full of people, and this group is identified by a selection of 'tags', broad terms that define that group. Tags such as 'full room' or 'many people' or 'church pastors' and so on.

Well with the Semantic Web the room full of people is identified as: Michael, a plumber who loves classical music, Indian food, and colours his hair once a month; and Janice who is wearing a green jump suit and thinks highly of Mongolian Yak cheese; and so on. The Semantic Web will provide the ability to categorise in much more detail what is contained on a website, application or database.

The Present



The Semantic Web



Following the example a little further, if one room of people want to talk to another room of people, then with the present Web they would talk to a room representative. With the Semantic Web, each member can talk to any other member, rather than a collective representation.

So rather than simply link a page, we link all the words, the images, whatever is on that page. It creates a much deeper relationship between things on the internet.

Right now the Web requires a human to make sense of a website or a page, The aim with the Semantic Web is to present Web page data, 'in such a way that it is understood by computers, enabling machines to do the searching, aggregating and combining of the Web's information — without a human operator.'³⁸

'The Semantic Web creates a web of data that allows computers to find, extract, share, re-use information, and potentially even reason with it.'³⁹

And this is no pipe dream; there is quite a momentum gathering. On the 10th of June, 2009, the UK government announced that Tim Berners-Lee will assist the government to embrace the semantic web.

And if the semantic web were to transpire, then we could see the emergence of the most extraordinary Bible resource.

An online semantic Bible where every word, every phrase, every passage, every book is a piece of data connected to all other bits of data around the web.

This would give us a treasure chest of resources in which to explore and understand the Bible.

Take John 1:1 - 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Available to us would be a plethora of resources behind each word, passage or even the complete book of John. We could find sermons preached, music video, audio recordings, cartoons, liturgy, poetry and commentary; whatever has been created online that relates to the particular word, phrase or theme could be accessed.

Most of this is now available, but it is in separate 'rooms' around the web and to access them we need to leave our room and go to the room that contains it. With the semantic web we can stay where we are and draw into our room whatever piece of data we require.

Now this would create a potential deluge of information which would be managed through a set of filters. And the thing with the semantic web is that it learns your preferences, it works out what sort of things you like. An example of this is Amazon.com where in selecting a book, the software recommends other titles that might interest you. So the more you use the semantic Bible, the more it becomes attuned to your particular style.

Perhaps when you come to the semantic Bible you bring with you an online profile which personalises your web experience wherever you are on the internet.

So in coming to John 1:1 lets say your profile is that you are a Charismatic Emergent with Pre-Vatican two Catholic leanings who enjoys technical exegesis drawn from noted authors or peer reviewed publications and loves long walks along the beach. Well the only information presented to you would fit those descriptors.

And if we have access to billions of bits of data, then could we see the day when the Semantic Bible is capable of building a liturgy or sermon outline, complete with suggested visual aids all with the click of a button. Given the growth of a mobile technology it is likely this amazing resource would fit in your pocket.

A number of months ago I started a page on Facebook called The Bible,⁴⁰ which is an experiment in presenting the Bible in the Digital Space.

It's a simple proposition: every day I send out a short scripture quote to 'fans' of The Bible page. That scripture then appears on their wall and can also be viewed by their community of friends. So the number of people exposed to the scripture passage is considerably more than the number of fans, which presently stands at more than 12,000 fans and is growing by around 600 fans a day.

What is also happening is that people are leaving comments on the Bible page in response to the scripture passage as they not only interact with the passage, but also with each other.

At the beginning I spoke of the church advert that included, The Bible: God's Facebook. Rather than, The Bible: God's Facebook perhaps it should read, **Facebook: God's Bible**. Not a bad summation of the shift we the church need to undertake.



About Rev Mark Brown

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