

TECHNOLOGY AND A NEW REFORMATION

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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The first Reformation had the printing press to spread its message. We today have new information technology to spread the same message. Could we be on the heels of another great reforming surge?

It was an electric moment! Two figures appeared side by side and larger than life on the big screen.

One was a prominent scientist who was present in a video conference room at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) in Tacoma, Washington. The other was a well-known theologian who was speaking live from a retreat center in Arizona. They were being questioned simultaneously by a member of the PLU religion faculty who was attending the weekend conference on science and religion.

In addition to the participants in Tacoma and Phoenix, students and faculty at seminaries in Chicago and Dubuque also tuned in to watch the two keynote speakers respond and dialog with each other. In spite of the thousand plus miles that separated them, it seemed as though they were in the same room with each other. Conference attendees in four different locations around the country were brought together through the "magic" of interactive video technology.

Imagine if you will, Martin Luther at the Wartburg Castle linked by the Internet with his followers in the cities of Wittenberg, Augsburg, and other sites throughout the German-speaking Empire. While Luther did not have access to the World Wide Web, he did have use of a new technology in his day called the printing press which he and his colleagues used effectively as a propaganda tool to fan the fires of the first reformation.

This article will argue that new communication technology such as Internet and interactive video may well usher in a new reformation for the 21st century. For just as the printing press was used by the evangelicals (Lutherans) of the 16th century as an effective means of communicating the gospel, so new technology will enable us to reach an even wider audience as well as transform the church of the new millennium.

Technological Changes

The Word of God has been proclaimed to God's people through the latest communication tools available. What originated in an oral tradition was eventually

written down in manuscript form. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 in the hills above Qumran (in Israel) revealed documents — including a manuscript of the Prophet Isaiah — at least 2,000 years old encased in clay jars.

Subsequent archeological digs revealing a scriptorium at Qumran seemed to indicate that the Essene community had played an important role in preserving the ancient Scriptures. Perhaps that is why St. Paul wrote: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels..." (2 Corinthians 4:7)

And for the next 1,500 years of Christianity, the Word of God would be so preserved and transmitted. Indeed, as they painstakingly copied the Scriptures in the scriptoriums of monasteries across Europe, the medieval monks played the same important role as had the Essenes many years before them.

Because these hand-written manuscripts contained the Vulgate (or the Latin translation), and the fact that the majority of the population was yet illiterate even in their own language, the general public still depended on the spoken word.

The invention of the printing press around 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg radically changed the way the gospel was communicated. In his book, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*, Mark Edwards, Jr. argues that Martin Luther and his followers used this new communication technology as a propaganda tool to effectively further the cause of the Protestant Reformation:

The Reformation saw the first major, self-conscious attempt to use the recently invented printing press to shape and channel a mass movement. The printing press allowed Evangelical publicists to do what had been previously impossible, quickly and effectively reach a large audience with a message intended to change Christianity. For several crucial years, these Evangelical publicists issued thousands of pamphlets discrediting the old faith and advocating the new...The printing press played far more than just an assisting role in this many-sided contest over authority. It broadcast the subversive messages with a rapidity that had been impossible before its invention. More than that, it allowed the central ideological leader, Martin Luther, to reach the "opinion leaders" of the movement quickly, kept them all in touch with each other and with each other's experience and ideas, and allowed them to "broadcast" their (relatively coordinated) program to a much larger and more geographically diverse audience than had ever been possible before.²

There is no question that the printed word played a crucial role in the German Reformation. Edwards reports that between 1518 and 1546, more than 60 presses in the towns of the Holy Roman Empire "had become the nerve centers of the Evangelical media campaign, flooding the cities of the empire with aggressive little pamphlets advocating reform."³

During this time frame, these presses produced over 6 million vernacular treatises supporting or opposing the Reformation; and the output for Luther alone was over 3

million copies which did not even include any copies of his German translation of the Bible. In fact, Martin Luther out-published all the other reformers in the vernacular almost two to one.

The use of the vernacular (e.g. German) rather than only Latin was another unique feature of the "Lutheran media blitz" of the early 16th century. For example, during the 16-year period following 1517, Luther's published editions numbered over 2,550, and approximately 85 percent of these were in German. During this same time period, the Catholics produced a little more than 500 different printings and less than half of these were in German.

This led Edwards to conclude: "It is the magnitude of the effort, and its overwhelming use of the vernacular, that justifies designating this the West's first large scale media campaign."⁴

A New Reformation?

Could the new information technology have the same impact as the printing press did only 500 years ago? Might it become a tool for launching yet another reformation throughout the church that calls the church back to its missional nature and purpose and also offers new tools and resources for more effective mission outreach of the gospel?

Where the Protestant Reformation liberated the gospel, it is my hope that a second reformation might liberate the church to be about mission in the world.

Some like Pastor Michael Slaughter would argue that God's Spirit was unleashed anew in the 16th century because the reformers were able to adapt a new cultural technology to help them spread the gospel message.

Slaughter in his book, *Out on the Edge: A Wake-up Call for Church Leaders On the Edge of the Media Reformation*, suggests we are on the verge of a new and major reformation of the church. "Electronic media is to the 'Reformation' of the twenty-first century what Gutenberg's press was to the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."⁵

Slaughter is persuasive in his claim that the "media reformation" is a life and death issue for the church as it attempts to communicate the gospel in a post-literate culture. While there is growing evidence of a renewed interest in spirituality among the general public, church attendance for most mainline denominations appears headed in a downward spiral.

Slaughter believes one of the reasons for the decline is that "most churches are not speaking a language that makes sense to a culture asking spiritual questions...We are still using the language of a literate culture in a post-literate, visual age."⁶ He cites compelling evidence that we live in an increasingly visual culture where American

children view more than 5,000 hours of television by age five, and where more American households have television (99.9%) than indoor plumbing (97%).⁷

There is no question that we live in an unparalleled time of change. The critical question is can the church adapt to new paradigms and, like the 16th century reformers before us, adopt new and more effective ways of communicating the gospel in a new century? Will the church embrace the new information technology of the Internet and interactive video as a way of enhancing its ministry and mission?

Slaughter, who advocates the use of technology to provide multi-sensory worship, believes that "electronic media are a life and death issue for the church because electronic media are the language of the culture."⁸

Just as Luther's translation of the Bible into the language of the common people capitalized on and, in fact, promoted a new age of literacy, so the church is challenged to use the language of today — electronic media — to communicate the healing and transforming truth of God's love in Christ.

Future Vision

Loren Mead, author of *The Once and Future Church* series, submits that the next century will witness the transformation and birth of a new church. He suggests that the current and outdated model for the church is from the Constantinian era that assumes Christianity to be the dominant force within the Roman empire surrounded by a supportive culture.

While Mead offers clues as to what the church of the future may be like, let me offer my own vision of what changes a new reformation might usher in.

I believe that three distinguishing marks of a third millennium church would include the following:

First, it will be a missional church that seeks to boldly live out the mission imperative of the New Testament. Each congregation will once again see itself as a "mission outpost" whose front door opens up onto a fertile mission field. They will be attentive to the needs of their community and to the cultural context in which they minister. The church will view as a primary task the training of mission leaders to serve in the local context.

Second, it will be the Church of All the Baptized. The Lutheran doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" will be more than just a dream, but a reality as Christians learn to claim their giftedness and calling to ministry in daily life. Congregations become discipling centers for teaching and training believers for their life in the world as "frontline missionaries" whose faith and lifestyle are often counter-cultural.

Thirdly, congregations will be places of healthy and authentic Christian community that are collaborative in nature. The church will practice healthy inter-dependence

among its leadership, members, and corporate structures. It will acknowledge the need for linkages with others and actively seek out new partners for ministry that reach beyond traditional boundaries.

Rather than trying to be all-things-to-all-people, congregations, for example, will build on their strengths and seek to complement one another for the sake of more effective and efficient mission outreach.

Such a vision will require that today's church learns to "think outside the box"; and I am convinced that technology can be a tool to help bring about a much needed reformation.

The silicon chip (e.g. the computer, CD-ROM, Internet, etc.) is changing the way we learn and interact with one another. Like the printing press, this new information technology can be harnessed as a tool for great good and even become a vehicle for God's Spirit. Web-based courses, Internet chat rooms, and interactive video conferences are becoming more commonplace.

Already a group of Lutheran congregations in the West (Regions 1 and 2) — under the tutelage of California Lutheran University (CLU) and Pacific Lutheran University — are contemplating some exciting possibilities in a distance learning initiative that will link congregations with each other and with the learning centers of the church.

Learning Possibilities

The following scenarios that seem "cutting edge" may soon seem commonplace.

1. A Sunday morning adult class is offered via interactive video from a religion professor speaking from a college campus to 10 congregations across Washington State.
2. A leadership training conference is held simultaneously in 15 congregations in Washington, Oregon, and California, each congregation linked together "live" to key resource people at a college and/or seminary of the church.
3. Congregational leaders in a given church are linked to each other and the church staff through a virtual web meeting site.
4. A pastor is in touch several times a week with members of his 9th grade confirmation class using the Internet.
5. Ten small groups meet in different homes in the same town and are connected for an interactive Web TV Bible Study given by the pastor from his study.
6. A workshop on vocation and call is offered for youth and young adults across Regions 1 and 2 who attend the event at several congregational sites that are linked

by way of interactive video to Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Luther Seminary, CLU, and PLU.

Historic Hinge

We live at what some believe to be a hinge point in history, perhaps on the verge of another reformation or yet another Pentecost. The church in North America faces the challenge of being transformed from a church of the empire (i.e., Loren Meade's Constantinian paradigm) to a missional church serving on the missionary frontier of a post-Christian, post-literate culture.

Now, at the beginning of a new century, God's Spirit is calling us to a faithful and contextual proclamation of the gospel. In the ground-breaking new work *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, we are persuaded that "the church must constantly hear the gospel afresh in order to discern its faithful response. It must constantly examine how it has been shaped by its context and ask God to convert and transform it...The gospel is always conveyed through the medium of culture. It becomes good news to lost and broken humanity as it is incarnated in the world through God's sent people, the church."⁹

The Word of God is timeless yet has come to us in different vehicles throughout the centuries. The new information technology is a tool of our culture that is perhaps the "new wine skin" that will enable us to incarnate the gospel as never before.

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Endnotes

1. Source: Gazette du livre medieval as reported in the January 25, 1999 edition of *Forbes*, 90.
2. Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1,7.
3. Edwards, 15.
4. Edwards, 21.
5. Michael Slaughter, *Out on the Edge: A Wake-up Call for Church Leaders on the Edge of the Media Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 25.
6. Slaughter, 17,24.
7. Slaughter, 23.
8. Slaughter, 63.
9. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 14,18.