

NINETY-FIVE TWEETS: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
REFORMATION

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Introduction

Like the printing press in the sixteenth century, the digital communication technology¹ of the twenty-first century presents some new opportunities for reform and revitalization within the church. Today's social media has created new spaces for the gospel to inhabit, but at the same time there are a host of pitfalls for churches seeking to embody the gospel in what might appear to be a hostile environment. Electronic devices like smart phones and tablets are changing the way we consume media, making us into media producers as well as consumers. A whole new generation of disciples of Jesus are communicating with each other in new ways—they are even reading differently than the generation before them. Can we learn from Luther's successful use of the social media of his day to create an effective and faithful approach to social media today? After briefly exploring the historical background of the printing press and the communication strategies of the early Reformation, this article investigates how Luther's use of the social media of his day can help today's church use communication technology to make faithful investments in discipleship and spiritual formation.

1. In this article, digital communication technology will be assumed to include all forms of electronic communication devices. This includes the use of cell phones, smart phones, tablets as well as computers to make use of SMS text messaging (or apps like Instagram, SnapChat, Twitter, and Facebook), as well as discussion boards and chat rooms.

Historical Background

In 1440, Johannes Gutenberg developed the printing press which provided an efficient way to reproduce long texts quickly and inexpensively. Once the text for a page was set, Gutenberg could produce hundreds of copies of it in one day. As a result, an Italian bishop observed in 1470 that three men working on a press for three months could produce more than three-hundred copies of a book. This was more than three scribes could produce in a lifetime.² The printing press had an immediate economic impact on the exchange of information. The price of books fell by two thirds, and by 1500, around 250 different cities in Europe had operational printing presses.³ In Luther's day, as many as 10,000,000 books had already been printed.⁴

Contrary to popular legend, Luther's Ninety-five Theses were likely written before 31 October 1517, and were included in a letter he mailed to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz on that date.⁵ There was nothing rebellious about that letter. In fact, it was deeply respectful and completely appropriate for a man of his station addressing a superior.⁶ Luther's disputation was likely not posted on the castle church door in Wittenberg until later, perhaps the middle of November.⁷

Of more significance is the fact that these theses were written in Latin, the preferred language of the academic community. They were propositions that Luther wished to discuss in the academic custom of the day. Posting theological points of order publicly on the door of the castle church was not an act of public protest—not akin to an angry blog post or a fit of Twitter rage. The church door was a public bulletin board and posting a discussion topic like this, in Latin, was an invitation for someone in

2. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 50.

3. Van Zanden, "Common Workmen," [n.p.].

4. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 50.

5. Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 201.

6. The letter begins, "Most Reverend Father in Christ, Most Illustrious Sovereign: Forgive me that I, the least of all men, have the temerity to consider writing to your Highness." In his biography on Luther, Eric Metaxas calls it a "model of cringing sycophancy." See Metaxas, *Luther*, 109.

7. Iserloh, *Luther zwischen Reform und Reformation*, 80–90.

the University to step up to the plate and answer Luther's questions on these matters, primarily, on the sale of indulgences. He had no idea of what would happen next.

Luther Goes Viral

Although originally written in Latin and intended for an exclusively academic audience, the Ninety-five Theses caused a stir, first in Wittenberg and then further afield. By December of that same year, printed editions of "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" appeared simultaneously in Leipzig, Nuremberg, and Basel, printed by some of Luther's friends who had received copies of the original.⁸ German translations soon followed, and with breathtaking speed they were widely distributed across Europe.⁹

It is worth pausing at this point to consider the difference the printing press may or may not have made in turning Luther's teachings into a late-medieval phenomenon. Those familiar with church history will know that proto-reformer Jan Hus (1369–1415) was burned at the stake for making similar accusations one hundred years before Luther. After expressing his opposition to church authorities, Hus was promptly burned at the stake in 1415, and his reform movement was forced underground. It is naïve to suggest that, "if only Hus had the benefit of a printing press things would have turned out differently for him." There is more going on here than just the leveraging of a new communication technology. Besides the obvious cultural and political differences between Hus' Bohemia and Luther's Saxony, there was a more significant social difference at play. While a printing press would have made it quicker to create copies of Hus'

8. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 52.

9. Luther's friend Friedrich Myconius later wrote that "hardly fourteen-days had passed when these propositions were known throughout Germany and within four weeks almost all of Christendom was familiar with them." Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 53. Eric Metaxas also adds that "by March of 1518 even Erasmus [of Rotterdam] himself had gotten his hands on a copy. And he sent it along to his friend Thomas More in England, which is how it fell under the wandering eyes of King Henry VIII." Metaxas, *Luther*, 124.

written work, and consequently easier to communicate it, that is not why Hus' reformation movement was largely stopped while Luther's was not. Something else arrived in the wake of the printing press.

By the time Luther was calling for reform, the printing press had been around for more than seventy years, which was long enough for a network of presses to be in place across Europe, actively serving many of the larger towns and villages in Europe. On top of that physical infrastructure, there was a socio-economic structure: a social network of readers and writers who enjoyed exchanging and discussing new publications. There was now a marketplace for ideas that were bought and sold as printed brochures. By the sixteenth century, printers in many parts of Europe could make a substantial income by printing pamphlets, as long as they were free to do so and as long as the pamphlets were popular.¹⁰

This created a media environment remarkably similar to today's World Wide Web of blogs, discussion boards, and social networks. Author Tom Standage describes Saxony's intellectual ecosystem as a "decentralized, person-to-person media system whose participants took care of distribution, deciding collectively which messages to amplify through sharing, recommendation and copying."¹¹ Media analysts refer to systems like this as a "networked public" rather than an audience.¹² Luther's

10. Unlike England or France in the seventeenth century, Saxony was under the influence of the electors, who were in turn governed by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain. In the 1520s, Charles was distracted by war with France, and then the prospect of a Turkish Muslim invasion. He did not have the political will, nor the capacity to enforce a ban on printing Luther's writings, which allowed them to be quickly and broadly distributed through this sixteenth century form of social media. See Metaxas, *Luther*, 391.

11. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 53–54.

12. Wei He, in his book *Networked Public: Social Media and Social Change in Contemporary China*, describes a "Networked Public" as "the active social actors in a new media ecology." Networked public communication is different than mass communication like television or radio and it is also different from interpersonal communication like telephone or telegraph because the consumers are participants in the media they consume. See He, *Networked Public*, 15.

supporters were more than just readers or consumers of religious propaganda. They were also the conduits and replicators of his content. Luther's supporters would read and recommend the tracts that they liked. Those who operated printing presses were economically motivated to reproduce tracts or books that they knew they could sell, though Luther did not receive any compensation for his work.¹³ The price point for these small tracts was just right; Many of Luther's publications could be bought for a few pfennigs, which was about the same price as a chicken.¹⁴

Luther was startled with the speed that his initial academic notice had travelled.¹⁵ In addition, he regretted not using more accessible language. But how was he to know that an invitation to a theological debate, written in Latin, to the faculty at Wittenberg would be translated and spread throughout the whole region with such breathtaking speed? To a publisher friend in Nuremberg he wrote, "I would have spoken far differently and more distinctly had I know what was going to happen."¹⁶

In March of 1518, however, we see a glimpse of the media-smarts that Luther possessed. Writing in simple language, he adapted his approach and leveraged this new tool to even greater success. Luther had friends in Wittenberg publish a pamphlet entitled "A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace." In it, he avoided the complicated theological language of his previous publication to make sure that everyone in the whole region could read and understand it. The pamphlet was an instant success and was a

13. Despite Luther's tremendous success as a writer and a promoter of his ideas, he did not receive any money from his many publications. The printers in Wittenberg however made a small fortune in printing Luther's work and distributing it widely. See Metaxas, *Luther*, 354.

14. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 54.

15. In a letter to Pope Leo X he humbly apologized saying that "my writings have spread further than I ever expected and are so deeply rooted in the hearts of so many people that I am not in the position to revoke them." Quoted in Metaxas, *Luther*, 161.

16. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 53.

testament to Luther's skill in exploiting this new media environment.¹⁷

The printing press, combined with an intellectual and economic ecosystem of readers and printers created this "Networked Public" that made viral messages in Luther's day possible. Local printers in each town had shops where they sold their publications and their stock of Luther's pamphlets (or lack of stock) created a signalling mechanism that allowed the German townsfolk to recognize how popular Luther's ideas were and how widespread they were becoming, and this made them even more popular.¹⁸ Luther clearly recognized the power of this form of social media and effectively used it to massively expand the support base of his reform movement.

Before long, Luther's pamphlets became the most popular (and therefore most lucrative) publication for publishers to print. A contemporary at the time remarked that they "were not so much sold as seized."¹⁹ Of the seventy-five hundred pamphlets that were published in the German-speaking region of Saxony from 1520–1526, two thousand of them were editions of a few dozen works by Luther.²⁰ The peak year was 1523, when four hundred different editions of Luther's works were published. Tom Standage adds that Luther wrote as many as one-third of

17. The pamphlet was reprinted eighteen times in 1518, in editions of at least one thousand copies each. See Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 53.

18. Clay Shirky, in his book *Here Comes Everyone: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, describes how three levels of knowledge contribute to information cascades that make viral messages work. It has to do with metaknowledge about the media itself. It starts when someone knows something. If that knowledge is popular, it will not be long before others know this information too. Viral multiplication starts to kick in when, a printer shares that he is all sold out of Luther pamphlets (for the third time) or when everyone in town is seen reading and talking about Luther's latest publication. Now everyone knows, but what is more important, everyone learns that everyone knows. Finally, when people start talking about the fact that people are talking about Luther, that is when you reach Shirky's third level of knowledge: when everyone knows that everyone knows that everyone knows. At that point, explosive growth is the result. See Shirky, *Here Comes Everyone*, 163.

19. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 55.

20. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 54.

the six million to seven million pamphlets published by Protestants during the first ten years of the Reformation.²¹

The Problem with Print Culture

This new print culture seemed to be a great blessing, at least to Luther, but it was not all positive. As the result of Luther's early success with the printers, and their presses and networked public that they created, Luther became an advocate of the printing press and the German villager's right to read for themselves. He famously remarked that "printing is the ultimate gift of God and the greatest one."²² Rather than depending on religious authorities to tell common people what to think and what to believe, Luther urged "that every Christian study for himself the Scripture and the pure word of God."²³ In service of this desire, Luther worked night and day during the winter of 1522, while hiding in the Wartburg castle, to translate the entire New Testament from Erasmus' Greek text into German. Amazingly, he accomplished this feat in just eleven weeks²⁴ and then moved on to complete a translation of the Old Testament over the next three years.²⁵

Unfortunately, increased literacy—people reading and thinking for themselves—had consequences that Luther and others had not anticipated. Peasants and laborers began questioning the existing power structures, drawing inspiration from their own reading of Scripture. There were, after all, no feudal structures described in the Old or New Testament, so why should they tolerate them now?²⁶ The ensuing uprising, known as the German Peasant's War of 1524–1526, left thousands of people dead and certainly dampened Luther's enthusiasm for the printing press. Luther later changed his media strategy once more and

21. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 55.

22. Luther, *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, 523.

23. Gilmont, "Protestant Reformations and Reading," 220.

24. Metaxas, *Luther*, xii.

25. Metaxas, *Luther*, 293.

26. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 26.

began writing catechisms—essential doctrines that could be learned by rote. He later called these catechisms, “the layman’s Bible,” and considered reading them a replacement for reading the Bible, at least for the layperson.²⁷

In order to stabilize the fledgling Reformation community, Luther adapted the use of his social network to reinforce these faith communities by telling them that the task of teaching from the Bible should now be left exclusively to the preachers.²⁸ The regular member of the Christian Community should still commit themselves to learning the catechisms and to their practice of faith but they should also submit themselves to the discernment of the whole Christian community rather than trying to tease out new interpretations on their own.

The Return of Social Media

The advent of the Internet and computer-mediated communication in the late twentieth century has spawned a social media revolution that might seem to us today to be unprecedented, but Tom Standage argues in his book *Writing on the Wall: Social Media—The First Two Thousand Years*, that our current social media revolution is not a new thing but the return of a very old thing. For example, he explains that what the Romans did,

with papyrus rolls and messengers; today hundreds of millions of people do [with] Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other Internet tools. The technologies involved are very different, but these two forms of social media, separated by two millennia, share many of the same underlying structures and dynamics: they are two-way, conversational environments in which information passes horizontally from one person to another along social networks, rather than being delivered vertically from an impersonal central source.²⁹

27. Gilmont, “Protestant Reformations and Reading,” 220.

28. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 26.

29. Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 3.

The communication technology that we use today is new—we have traded wax writing tablets for iPads³⁰—but the general principles remain the same. Standage suggests that the radio and television technologies of the twentieth century were an interruption of the social media continuum, and not a continuation of what came before them.

Until recently, twentieth century media outlets were assumed to be authoritative. For the most part, if you saw it on the news or read it in a published work, it could be trusted. All this has changed since the arrival of the Internet. Standage is suggesting the World Wide Web represents, not the arrival of something new, but the return of the decentralized, two-way, distributed network of the Middle Ages where we are not only media consumers, but we are also media producers. With the use of Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, you are now your own brand, your own book publisher, your own radio and television station. But with the loss of the top down, one-way media structures, we also have a loss of authority similar to what Luther was struggling with in the sixteenth century.

The benefit of a decentralized, two-way, distributed network is that it is easier than ever for one person to communicate with a large number of people at a relatively low cost. The drawback is that you cannot assume that a speaker in this networked public is authorized or qualified to speak just because they can be heard. How can we know if something we read is valid? How can we judge if something is true? When grappling with this question today it is useful for us to reflect on how Luther addressed a similar authority crisis in the wake of the Reformation.

Following Luther's Lead

Luther quickly realized after the accidental success of his Ninety-five Theses that this distributed network of printers and

30. Standage comments that the Roman wax tablets used by slaves to transport simple messages or things like grocery lists are strikingly similar to iPads, both in their weight and size, and even appearance. See Standage, *Writing on the Wall*, 24.

readers could be used to spread his message and hopefully motivate the church to change its ways. Although the church was not reformed in the way that he wanted, Luther's social network could still be used to form Christian communities and reinforce faithful practices for the church to follow. But communities are formed with more than just information structures as this next example illustrates.

A community is more than just the information that it shares. A community is an embodied expression that is deeply connected with the space the members of that community occupy. Luther soon discovered the importance of physical embodiment to Christian community. Soon after the beginning of the Reformation, Luther found that his position as a leader of the Reformation movement did not entirely have to do with the fact he frequently wrote and published literature that educated the German townsfolk. He was a leader because of his embodied presence in the community. During 1521, the year he spent hiding in the Wartburg castle, his good friend Philip Melancthon struggled to keep the Reformation movement from being side-tracked by the many powerful personalities vying for influence and control. No amount of writing and publishing by Luther could keep the wolves at bay. It was not until Luther returned to Wittenberg in the spring of 1522 that he could silence his critics, banish the usurpers, and establish himself as the leader of the movement and continue the support of his fellow reformers across the Rhineland.

Communication technology, whether it be digital or otherwise, can create the illusion of community, but it will not survive in the absence of personal presence. Luther's example reminds us that social media is a powerful tool, but we need to use it in ways that lead us into embodied fellowship for lasting spiritual formation and discipleship to take place. Communication technology cannot faithfully substitute for personal presence.

For example, while I owned a sailboat, I became a member of an online community of sailors who owned the same model boat as I did. After being vetted by the online administrator, I was added to the group and could participate in discussions on boat-specific topics like what products to use to seal the fibreglass

deck and when the keel winch needed to be replaced. It was a great experience and I felt a real sense of connection with the people in the group. During the next two and a half years I got to know some members of the group as we shared pictures and swapped stories. After a couple of years, the Administrator spent a few months trying to find someone to take over the day-to-day administration of the group and, after failing to do so, announced that he would be closing the group. With that, the group instantly disappeared.

I was amazed at how quickly that virtual community disappeared for me. What had felt to me like a vibrant community of people suddenly evaporated into nothing. It was a community that existed only in the form of communication. When the medium for that communication disappeared, the community disappeared with it.

The only parts of the community that survived were the parts that were actually embodied. For example, about a year before the group disbanded one of the founding members noticed that another long-time member from upper New York State had stopped posting pictures. He lived a four-hour drive away and so, because he was concerned for his wellbeing, he drove to the marina where he thought the boat might be kept and discovered that his online friend had been admitted to hospice with terminal cancer. He posted to the group that our friend was ill, and the group sprang to life. Many sent him cards and some encouraging words through email, and some even ordered flowers. For all the world-shrinking power of the Internet, our community did not really take shape until someone crossed the line into the embodied world. Digital communication technology gives us the capacity to communicate broadly, but it will only build community if we chose to be embodied in the midst of it.

For all the benefits that digital communication technology brings, it does not naturally lead us into this kind of embodiment. That is something that we must deliberately choose to do. Author John Dyer has his own spiritual disciplines for using technology to lead to embodiment. He says that,

technology is for the table . . . Everything we do with our tools—scheduling appointments on our phones, heating up meals in the microwave, reading updates from friends and family on social networks—should all be directed toward enriching the few precious face-to face encounters we have in our busy world.³¹

Dyer explains that he deliberately resolves to have at least one face-to-face appointment per week that comes as the result of his social media conversations. In that way, social media creates opportunity for embodied connection rather than replacing embodied connection.

Technology naturally provides an opportunity to create connection, but that is not the same as community. According to Dyer and others, church leaders who unreflectively embrace the use of Twitter and Facebook to sustain weak social ties in their faith community will begin to realize that they are not necessarily strengthening their communities. Instead, they may be training the people around them to define community much more shallowly than they should.

For example, sociologist Sherry Turkle warns that “when technology engineers intimacy, relationships can be reduced to mere connections. And then eas[e of] connection becomes redefined as intimacy.”³² Turkle is by no means a Luddite who is opposed to technology in whatever form is currently popular. Her warning starts to gain traction when you think of all the ways communication technology has a reductionist tendency to it. Terms like “friend,” and “like,” mean less in the Facebook world than they do in the embodied world, but our use of Facebook is starting to change how we speak and behave in real life. Supporting a cause has become a lot easier because of the social platform that Facebook provides, but are we better off for it?³³ When virtual communication is treated the same as conversation by my peer group, Turkle’s prophetic warning comes true: ease of

31. Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*, 173.

32. Turkle, *Alone Together*, 16.

33. The term “slacktivism” has been coined to describe the minimal commitment that is required by most social media causes. Change your profile picture or post a pithy quote and you are done.

connection becomes treated the same as intimacy. The good news, however, is that it does not have to be that way.

The social media of Luther's day created a whole new world for the post-Reformation church, but the network of printers and readers did not automatically populate this new world with meaningful rituals and symbols. Luther and the Reformers had to choose those practices themselves—indeed, they had to choose them in light of the weaknesses that the printing press and the print culture had. Unfortunately, this new print culture with its networked public was not a positive change for everyone. Whether Luther intended it or not, printing and distributing Bibles throughout the German countryside had a significant impact on the German people.³⁴ Certainly, not everyone could read, but those who could started asking questions, and some of these questions had never been asked before. The issue of interpretation had never been struggled with before, since the only opinion that mattered was that of the church leadership. Now people could read and discern Scripture for themselves and this new attribution of authority had potentially destructive results in the years to come. Reading is not a benign activity. In Luther's day, it had great potential for harm, but it also had great potential for spiritual benefit. The same is true today.

Since the arrival of digital book readers in 2007,³⁵ educators and media pundits have debated whether reading from a tablet is the same as reading from a book. Researcher Naomi Baron has waded into the debate, writing that “much of the controversy

34. Metaxas observes that the high German dialect used in Luther's translation became the universalized form of German across the whole region. Many families could only afford one book, and that book was Luther's translation. Thousands of copies were sold in the first year alone. See Metaxas, *Luther*, 273.

35. The eBook world changed substantially in 2007 with the release of Amazon's first Kindle eReader. Three years later Apple released its first iPad which was also a very popular early electronic reading device. eBook sales peaked in 2011, when, for the first time, Amazon sold more eBooks than physical books, but that is no longer the case. In 2016, eBook sales started to drop off again while physical book sales continued to climb. See Baron, *Words Onscreen*, x. For more recent comparisons of sales data see Cain, “Ebook Sales.”

over digital reading revolves around how we view the relationship between ‘content’ and ‘container.’”³⁶ Recent research confirms that objects have surprising influences on their users. For example, Joshua Ackerman, a business professor at MIT, had the subjects of a study hold clipboards containing the resumes of people presumably applying for a job. Some of the clipboards were physically heavier than others and Ackerman found that candidates whose resumes were on the heavier clipboards were rated more highly than those with resumes on the lighter clipboards.³⁷ A more physically substantive clipboard made a resume seem more substantive and this observation is something that readers have echoed when reporting on their reading experiences. Most readers prefer to read out of print and the reason that is mentioned most often is the feel of the book. Readers say, “I just like the feel of books,” “reading books gives you the feeling that the content is more tangible.” Similarly, when asked what they miss when reading off a digital device, some respondents say, “I miss the paper while turning the page,” “I miss the nice feel of paper while reading,” “While holding the book, I can’t feel the progress I have made.”³⁸ Print books as containers do have an influence on their contents, but what about digital devices?

Cell phones have significant baggage for their users when it comes to using them as reading devices. Smart phones are, by design, distraction devices. They are used to alert us, and interrupt us, so it should come as no surprise that they are not the best objects to use when trying to read something of substance. In a study at the University of Essex, Sherry Turkle found that even the presence of a mobile phone on the table where two people were talking led subjects to judge the conversation as being less close and having less depth. They reported a lower satisfaction with the experience, even though the phone was not vibrating or beeping. “It’s sheer physical presence reminded subjects that

36. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 15.

37. Ackerman et al., “Incidental Haptic Sensations,” 1712–15.

38. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 144–45.

someone or something else might be waiting to grab their attention.”³⁹

The screen itself significantly influences a reader’s reading experience. Educators have found through studying eye movement that people read off screens differently than they read off of a page. Researcher Jakob Nielson observed that when people read online, “the dominant reading pattern looks somewhat like an ‘F.’”⁴⁰ A reader will quickly read the top couple of lines and then scan vertically down the left side of the page looking for something interesting which might cause the eyes to deflect along a line of text before continuing down the page. Baron summarized the findings by saying, “screens hasten us along. Print invites us to linger.”⁴¹

Over the first ten years of the eBook revolution researchers have found that there are two different kinds of reading. David Mikics observes, “Ebooks promote forward motion rather than slow, considered reading.” By contrast, “a print book is designed to aid slow reading, by making it easy for you to look back at what you’ve already read.”⁴² Similarly, Anne Mangen, a professor of reading says that the two platforms: digital eBooks and analog print books, offer two different kinds of mental orientation.⁴³ The eBook, through a screen gives you a frameless experience of some part of a written work. The print book, on the other hand, presents the work as a whole and invites you to enter it.

This research should have a significant impact when we consider the spiritual impact of the physical act of reading. Author Andrew Piper says that “reading isn’t only a matter of our brains; it’s something that we do with our bodies.”⁴⁴ Reading is

39. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 163. See also, Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 21ff.

40. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 43. For more on Nielsen’s work see Nielson, “F-Shaped Pattern for Reading Web Content.”

41. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 152.

42. Mikics, *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age*, 46.

43. Baron, *Words Onscreen*, 151.

44. The quote is from an excerpt “Out of Touch: E-Reading isn’t Reading.” Also see Piper, *Book Was There*, xviii.

an embodied practice and this practice is vital to the spiritual formation of disciples in our churches today. The research discussed above is telling us that how we read God's word matters as much as whether or not we read it at all. The Bible itself teaches that the Word of God is to be read at depth; it is consumed as much as it is read⁴⁵ and to read it at that kind of depth we need to enter it. God's word nourishes the spiritual life of a believer and to experience that we need to think more about how we read the Bible.

Whether or not Luther fully understood what widely publishing the Bible in German would do to Christians in Medieval Germany, he tempered his enthusiasm for the printing press as he discovered how it was affecting the German people. Luther tried, in his own way, to bring the people's personal interpretation of the word under the governance of the local churches. As a result, new interpretations and new thinking about God and God's word would need to be confirmed by the teaching and the leadership of the local pastor. A similar corrective is useful now with the advent of completely different styles of reading. We need this kind of twenty-first century corrective for our spiritual reading habits.

The youth group leader in my congregation has begun to gently insist that the teens in her Bible class on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights bring their own print Bibles—preferably a study Bible. Many teens will initially respond, "Oh don't worry, I use my phone as my Bible." In light of the recent research reviewed above, that response should no longer be sufficient for ministry professionals. That is not to say that teens should be scolded for using Bible apps on their phones or forced to leave their phones outside of the sanctuary when it is time for worship. A Bible app is very useful for finding texts in a pinch or following along when someone else is reading. Where a digital device fails is in the deep reading of a Christian's personal devotional life. We want to train teens to go deep with God's word and a phone, over the long haul, simply cannot function in this way.

45. Consider the words of Jeremiah in Jer 15:16 and the words of Jesus in Matt 4:4.

Phones are distraction devices and are too physically insubstantial for the task of deep reading. We suggest to our teens that as part of a regular discipline for Bible reading, they should turn their phone off and quiet their mind for a moment before they begin. Just five minutes with their phones off, reading from a favorite Bible will provide a much deeper reading experience than twice as much time reading from a phone screen.

Conclusion

The Reformation was a revolution that was caused by the convergence of many different physical and social factors. The printing press did not primarily cause the Reformation, but it created a distributed network across Europe. After the surprising success of his Ninety-five Theses, Luther used this networked public of readers and printers to teach and form communities of faith in the Reformation tradition across Europe. Luther, however, did not blindly embrace this new social media network and its many tools unreflectively. Luther discovered the importance of embodied presence, in leading and being a part of Christian community. No matter how useful the communication network he had found, it did not take the place of a minister serving within their community.

Luther also adapted his use of social media when its social and psychological effects became more obvious. A plurality of interpretations of God's word was a natural consequence of a wide distribution of Bibles and a distributed network of authority. The practice of discernment was a brand-new challenge for disciples of Jesus in the sixteenth century. Luther recognized the need for a community when interpreting the Bible. Reading is an embodied practice and the network that brings God's word to the people does not bring sufficient space to appropriately enter God's word. The people of God must deliberately make room for God's word in their midst.

The social media network of the twenty-first century is not a brand-new thing but is rather the return of an old thing. The Mass Media experiment of the twentieth century was an interruption to the networked public of the Middle Ages and before.

Computers and smart phones may return us to a medieval media world, but they operate in a different way. The container influences the content and we are only beginning to understand how a digitally connected world influences our minds and our communities. Reading is evolving into two separate practices, each with different skills and outcomes. Digital devices—reading from a screen—privilege a kind of hyper-text reading that values speed and coverage over depth and careful discernment. There are sometimes when hyper-reading is the kind of reading that you want but spiritually formative reading is meant to be deep, slow, and embodied.

Analog devices—reading from a page—privilege the deep kind of reading that invites us to pause while reading and dwell with the content and see where it leads us. All of this is not to say that it is impossible to read deeply from screens, nor is it inevitable that print reading is always deep and meaningful. What educational research and Luther's example tells us is that we should reflectively consider the impact of the media forms that we use. The spiritual discipline of regular Bible reading benefits us more when we attend to the embodied physicality of reading while also attending to the spiritual communities in which we read. Luther did not blindly embrace new communication technology, no matter how useful and convenient it was. He leveraged it for maximum Kingdom benefit while also continuing to evaluate the impact it was having to his spiritual community. We would be blessed if we do the same.

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