HOW TO DO CHURCH AND DISCIPLESHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE: ENGAGING THE NEXT GENERATION

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Recent technological innovations have caused significant shifts in society from the Gutenberg age, which is focused around printed books, to the digital age, which focuses on digital distribution of content and digital communication. Some innovations that were particularly influential are the personal computer, the internet and the smartphone. Upcoming trend have been significantly sped up through various lockdowns due to the covid pandemic, starting in February 2020. While many of the measures and even habits incorporated during the pandemic have been reversed, there are significant effects of the pandemic that remain trends today, such as increased online shopping, more home office, and higher amount of communication through instant or voice messaging. This paper will seek to explore how those changes should be addressed by the church in how it does evangelism and discipleship, and a particular emphasis will be placed on how to reach and engage the next generation. The main argument is that the church should engage in incarnational discipleship and use digital tools to extend the reach of evangelism.

Engaging the Next Generation?

First of all: Who is the next generation? We might be inclined to think, it is the youth and young adults in our churches and societies. However, it would be more proper to speak of them as the *current* generation, since they are already part of church and society. The next generation is, on the other hand, a generation that isn't born yet. We cannot describe this generation, but at best work with projections. We may assume that current shifts in culture and society that are happening among the younger generation will continue on with the next generation. This assumption could, however, prove to be totally wrong. We will rather focus on developing a biblical model for engaging the next or the current or any other generation, because we believe the Bible gives us a model for discipleship that works across generations. A key issue will be the role of technology in discipleship.

Embracing Technological Progress

At first, it may seem as if the Bible does not have anything to say about the role of technology in discipleship. Jesus and the apostles did, however, make use of technology for effective evangelism and discipleship. Jesus used a boat on the lake to speak to large crowds (see Mark 3:9). This allowed the sound to travel so he could be made understood without having a microphone. Paul and his co-workers made use of the best technology available in the Roman empire to spread the gospel. In his evangelism strategy, Paul focused on the big cities and often travelled along the coast line. A well-developed seafaring network helped him to travel fast and safely and visit many cities. While he was absent, he used letters and the well-developed postal network of the Roman empire to communicate with the churches.

We can see from this that Jesus and the apostles embraced technology mainly as a tool to extend the reach of the gospel. The technology of letter-writing further allowed Paul to disciple churches while he could not be physically present.

The digital age gives us a lot of tools that we can use to extend the reach of the gospel. It also allows us to disciple persons while not being physically present with them.

Examples of good use of technology would be using media platforms and social networks to post evangelistic materials, discipleship series, or sermons. Instant messenger groups can be used to communicate among small groups or mentors and mentees. Special Bible study apps, such as YouVersion, can help with discipleship. Social networks focusing on events in the neighbourhood can be used to promote church events.

Ethical Concerns

In the 19th century, when the railway was introduced as a means of public transportation, there was a lot of skepticism, if not fear, regarding this new technology. In Victorian times, there was the concern that the rapid speed of up to 30 miles per hour would pose a danger to mental health (Hayes). Those concerns proved to be unfounded, and we wonder if some concerns against the use of digital technology can be understood in the same way as a general sense of caution regarding the new and the unknown.

There are, however, concerns regarding social and ecological justice that we need to take very seriously. The book of Joshua (chs. 13-19) tells us how the land of the people of God had been divided among different tribes and clans. This system guaranteed that every family had their own land. During the time of king Jeroboam II., this system was replaced with a capitalist system where a few landowners owned all of the land. Some people even became slaves in order to work the land that they formerly owned. The prophet Amos was among those who called out this grave social injustice:

> 6 Thus says the Lord:
> For three transgressions of Israel,
> and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
> because they sell the righteous for silver,
> and the needy for a pair of sandals—
> 7 they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
> and push the afflicted out of the way;
> father and son go in to the same girl,
> so that my holy name is profaned. (Am 2:6-7, NRSV)

The rise of digital technology transforms the economy and consequently raises social justice issues. There are just a few big tech companies that have proven particularly apt to adapt to the new circumstances and control a large share of the market. Only afterwards, governments have been able to pass regulations to regain control of the market. Data is the new gold that everyone is rushing for. The situation can turn out to be just like in the days of Amos when those big companies push the market to wherever they want it. This can lead to exploitation of the poor and also censorship of religious content. The church should, therefore, work toward a diversification of power within the IT sector by picking and supporting alternative providers, whenever possible and feasible.

Another concern is that not everyone has the same access to digital technology. Depending on age, education or origin, some people lack the competency to engage with digital technology. Others do not have the funds to purchase the needed software and hardware. Discipleship should not be done in a way that excludes people. When missionaries went into the mission field, they sometimes first had to taught the people how to read and write before they could teach them the Bible. In the same way as the redistribution of goods in Acts 4:32-35, those in the church who are skilled in this area can teach those who are disadvantaged or trailing behind so that they can participate not only in church life but in society in general. Regarding the choice of hard- and software, the church should avoid vendor lock-in and prefer free or

open-source products so more persons can have access. If the issue of equal access to digital tools is effectively dealt with, the digital tools can actually lead to higher equality of access than in the non-digital world. We can mention Wikipedia as an example. While in the Gutenberg world, only a few people had an encyclopaedia in their homes, nowadays the same kind of information (and probably more) is freely available to all persons who have access to the internet.

While many digital services are offered for free, many of them come with a severe cost for the environment because of energy consumption. Studies have shown that scrolling the timeline in Instagram for one minute has a carbon impact of 1,549 gEqCO2, equivalent to driving a car for 13 metres (greenspector.com). Using generative AI is even more costly. A query to ChatGPT with three questions has a carbon impact of 3,5 gEqCO2, more than double than scrolling the Instagram timeline (greenspector.com). Ecological issues are also social justice issues because people in less economically stable areas are more impacted by environmental hazards. Christians are called to be good stewards of creation. They should strengthen their prophetic voice, ask for what is good and just and not just follow trends to reach the young generation. The church needs to model a reflective and considerate use of the digital tools to the younger and the next generation. It could also host workshops and seminars to raise awareness about this topic.

Incarnational Discipleship

The triune God has chosen the model of incarnation to reveal himself. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14, NRSV) In this mode of revelation, God has limited himself to time and space during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Jesus could only minister to a finite amount of people, and among his followers, he picked 12 disciples to form the inner circle of discipleship. This discipleship was non-formal, which means that Jesus not only taught them lessons, but he shared his life with them. This was a holistic learning experience which later enabled some of the disciples to become apostles and leaders in the early church.

When using digital tools in discipleship, there is the danger to neglect the principle of incarnation as a model that Jesus has given to the church. Digital tools can help to extend the reach, but they will not be as holistic in bringing about discipleship as physical meetings.

This applies especially to the sacraments, baptism and communion. They are instituted by our Lord as means of grace which are received in a physical manner. While some churches have celebrated the Lord’s supper via distance during covid lockdown, this can only be regarded as a provisional method, and falls short of the true meaning of communion, which involves fellowship. It also falls short to convey grace, as in receiving the elements of communion, rather than serving oneself.

Also, it seems that even though covid lockdown has increased availability and acceptance of digital tools, especially the younger generation struggle with the retreat of their social life into the digital world. A 2024 study among adults in Germany (Die Techniker) found out that young adults in the age group of 18-39 years feel significantly more lonely (68%) than those in the age group of 40-59 (53%) or 60+ years (52%). They are also more severely impacted by the feeling of loneliness. One of our regional education providers, European Nazarene College, uses online learning already for a long time in most of their learning centres. The average EuNC student is 41 years old. Such a high average age may surprise if one assumes that

online learning is something that is particularly appealing to young people. However, it appears rather that the opposite is the case: As middle-aged or elderly people have become accustomed to digital tools, they may find them helpful to receive education with reduced mobility. Young people, however, long for personal encounters and holistic learning.

This means that a discipleship focused on the younger generation still needs to place a big emphasis on meetings in presence. Digital tools can help to extend the reach and stay in contact in those times when physical meetings are not possible. These days are not only a challenge to, but an opportunity for incarnational discipleship.

Conclusion

Digital tools are helpful for evangelism to increase the reach of the gospel. They can strengthen, but not replace in-person discipleship. Jesus "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." (Phil 2:6-7, NRSV) If Jesus thought incarnation was necessary, we should think so, too. The incarnational aspect is essential for a meaningful discipleship, especially in engaging the younger or the next generation. Let us reach those that we cannot gather, and let us gather those that we have reached.

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