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The Digital Catechism: Confirmation for a Digital World

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THE DIGITAL CATECHISM:
CONFIRMATION FOR A DIGITAL WORLD

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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ABSTRACT

Faith education and formation is important to every Lutheran pastor. Our denomination was born with a love for catechesis. Of all the rituals that remained after the split of the Western church, Confirmation might be the most treasured among churches. Unfortunately, for many pastors who have taught Lutheran Confirmation over their careers they have never felt more disconnected from their students. Their hearts are completely invested in catechesis but their methods do not produce effective results. Though they search more thoroughly than ever to find the right curriculum, nothing seems to work. We know that parents wonder why their children do not want to attend classes or pay attention during sermons. We also know this is a common problem in other churches. How can we disciple people if we do not know how to communicate with them?

Our greatest desire is to find a way to reach these students on their terms so they can grow spiritually. This paper began as a search for a new method to disciple these students so congregations will remain strong. It comes with the understanding that most churches will not simply abandon Confirmation programs because of their long heritage in our churches. It also recognizes that the effects of living in a digital world will only intensify as our world continues to grow more complex and more global. It is my hope that *The Digital Catechism* equips ministry leaders to better disciple not only younger generations but older generations as well. It is presented with faith that God's church will continue to grow and flourish. We may be changing how we think but that does not mean we have to change what we believe or in whom we put our faith.

SECTION 1: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. For Lutheran churches, this will be a time of both celebration of the past and evaluation for the future. Protestant churches were born in the age of words and points. The church is now in a post literate world where digital imagery replaces words. Congregations are investing money and time into websites, apps, and screens all with the hope that digital thinkers will attend services. What if the key to reaching people in the digital age is not a modern technique but rather a premodern one? Pastors need to embrace not only the meanings of the teachings of Jesus, but also his methods. Most of Jesus' audiences were preliterate people who thought in images and stories. Teaching with image-rich stories is once again the best method to disciple people.

Another key issue the church needs to update is its language. Theological education has primarily rooted its theology in words. Perhaps it is time to teach theology while engaging visual and pattern thinkers as well. While the church has learned to exegete the words of the bible, it has often failed to exegete its stories. Reaching digital learners requires a return to the visual and tangible techniques Jesus utilized in his own teaching. Allowing learners to taste, see, touch, smell and experience the metaphors of scripture will allow them to engage, remember, and implement its teachings. Metaphor, parable, and proverb each provide fertile soil for exegesis of not only the teachings of the bible but also the lives of people.

Pastors also need to grasp how semiotic preaching combines images and metaphors with story to create experiences that allow listeners to become participants

with the teacher. They more fully learn when they begin to see the story as their own. I have put an EPIC (experiential, participatory, image-rich, connective) and semiotic approach to the test in my own preaching and teaching ministry as an experimental playground for incorporating multisensory experiences into worship. The use of experiences like the scent and application of hyssop oil, carrying around a live snake, painting a doorpost, and feeding people dried locusts and figs prove an increased engagement and participation of listeners.

It is my hope that the practical application of this work is to develop a metaphor resource that demonstrates the use of metaphor to better communicate God's message to people. The goal is to inspire communicators to develop fresh metaphors for their personal contexts. The challenge is to break away from traditional approaches to preaching and teaching that often fail to engage listeners fully. A properly researched and written message does no good if its method of delivery does not use the language of its intended students. By researching a new understanding of education in a digital age, the church will be better able to disciple digital learners as followers of Christ.

In order to determine a possible future for education in the church, it is first necessary to discover the development of catechesis throughout church history and how the reformer Martin Luther used that foundation and sought to develop an early form of catechesis to disciple Christians. We will begin by exploring the biblical and theological foundation for catechesis in the New Testament and early church. Then we will examine the history, goals and methods for catechesis by the reformer Martin Luther and throughout the history of the Lutheran Church. Finally, we will propose the essential

methods, components, and content of catechesis that need to be used to connect modern curriculum with its historical and biblical roots.

Teaching Faith in the Early Church

Although confirmation is not mentioned in the New Testament or writings of the early church, its current practice is validated by the great commission to baptize and teach people. Catechesis is at its core a process of teaching people God's message. While the methods and forms were not as established as they are now in the institutional church, it is certain that teaching was essential to spiritual formation. The pastoral letters of Paul (the writings to Timothy and Titus) encourage them to be intentional in training God's people with sound doctrine to help encourage righteous living. While we would not want to characterize their methods as being as formalized as they are in the later institutional church, there does appear to be a core standard of doctrine that the people of God need for instruction. "The New Testament reveals that families played important roles in the expansion of the Church. Paul, for example, spoke of the faith handed down from generation to generation in the family of Lois, Eunice, and Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5)."¹ Discipleship today needs to embrace the intentionality of discipleship found in the New Testament while also retaining the core doctrine taught.

Early church leaders such as Origen, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria reveal much about catechesis in their writings. They created a process, the catechumenate, which allowed pagan adults to learn the teachings of the church before entry into the community. "Though the catechumenate took many forms, the content was an initial confession of faith in Jesus, entrance into the catechumenate, instruction into

¹ Mark Sengele, *Confirmation Basics* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 8.

the Word of God and the Creed, Baptism, chrismation (anointing of consecrated oil), laying on of hands, and reception of Holy Communion... Instruction was provided by teachers, clerical or lay.”² While learning would remain an important part of the Christian life, reception at communion signified acknowledgement that the individual was a Christian believer and a member of the local Christian community.

By the 4th and 5th centuries catechesis changed after the conversion of Roman Emperor Constantine. After the legalization and popularity of Christianity, thousands of people suddenly wanted to be connected to the church. The length and depth of study in the catechumenate was reduced significantly. The term confirmation was first used formally by Pope Leo I in the 5th century. Its modern usage in mainline churches is as a confirming of the faith established in Baptism as a child. This semantic meaning was most likely initiated near the end of the 5th century when “a French bishop delivered a homily in which he noted that confirmation provides an increase in the grace given in Baptism, which strengthened one for spiritual struggles.”³ The bible does not teach that confirmation increases the grace given in Baptism. However it is still useful today to speak of catechesis as a confirming of faith initiated in Baptism, especially in Lutheran contexts.

It is during the Middle Ages that confirmation became one of the seven sacraments of the western church and was more formalized through the work of scholastics like Thomas Aquinas. Much like Timothy in the New Testament, Christian children were taught largely by their parents in the home. The content of catechesis also

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid.

became more refined in the Middle Ages. The medieval catechisms that Martin Luther patterned his work after included the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and teachings on the sacraments. By the time the Middle Ages ended, groups like "the Bohemian Brethren insisted that Baptism was valid only when connected to a personal confession of faith, with confirmation serving as the rite that permitted full participation in a congregation and in the Eucharist."⁴ Suddenly the church had a standard of catechesis with a core doctrine of essential teachings and a central goal (a personal confession that confirms Baptism). Mainline churches that practice infant Baptism will need to make the connection that a personal confession is centered in a confirming of faith that started at Baptism.

Teaching Faith in the Lutheran Church

While Martin Luther adopted many of the standards of catechesis from the church in the Middle Ages, he rejected the order of confirmation because he believed it took the emphasis off the teaching and put it into the hands of an anointing by a bishop.⁵ Luther believed that education of all believers should be the central goal of catechesis, and that the central place this should happen is within the family. When uneducated families felt unqualified for this process, Luther established schools to help supplement what was already happening in the home. It is safe to say Luther never envisioned a time where children came from both broken homes and without a common faith background. The

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Martin Luther, "The Order of Baptism, 1523," in *Liturgy and Hymns* ed. Ulrich S. Leupold; trans. Paul Zeller Strodach; vol. 53 of Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 93.

Lutheran Church today will need to adapt to these changing times while still honoring Martin Luther's passion for education.

The reformers knew that education of clergy and laity would require new resources in their quickly changing world. The other faculty at the University of Wittenberg encouraged Luther to establish a resource to help unify and formalize the core dogma of catechesis, and Luther thus finished the *Small Catechism* in 1529. Luther's catechism presented the core doctrine in such a way that a global view of the faith was established. He was intentional in the ordering of the first three parts. His catechism was one of the first to begin with the Decalogue.

Thus the commandments teach man to recognize his sickness, enabling him to perceive what he must do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself to be a sinful and wicked person. The Creed will teach and show him where to find the medicine-grace-which will help him to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points him to God and his mercy, given and made plain to him in Christ. Finally, the Lord's Prayer teaches all this, namely, through the fulfillment of God's commandments everything will be given to him. In these three are the essentials of the entire Bible.⁶

This global view was impacted by the way Luther personally read the scriptures. He believed the Christian faith could be simplified into a process of exposing sin, receiving grace and forgiveness, and the life of the Christian. For Luther, the catechism became the bible of the laity because it contained everything necessary for the knowledge of salvation. Luther was shocked that Christians had been attending mass for decades and yet knew almost nothing of the basic tenets of the faith. Thus catechesis became his primary weapon to educate the people and clergy. Luther also "emphasized the

⁶ Martin Luther, "Personal Prayer Book, 1522," in *Devotional Writings II*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold; trans. Paul Zeller Strodach; vol. 43 of Luther's Works, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 14.

importance of instruction in preparation for the Lord's Supper."⁷ By connecting instruction and the Lord's Supper, Luther made catechesis a necessary part of the Christian life. It is because of this view that modern Lutherans believe "confirmation cannot be separated from the Lord's Supper."⁸ For Luther, education was the catalyst for participation, and it has remained so throughout the history of the Lutheran Church.

Luther spent much of his time both as a writer and as a musician revising the liturgies for the new protestant churches. Luther's liturgies tried to keep much of the formulary from the Latin mass while wanting his new German liturgies to reflect clearly his new theology emphasizing grace. Luther did include new orders for ordination, private confession, marriage, and Baptism. He believed that each of these rites needed to be diluted of their sacramental label since Christ himself had not commanded them or intended them to be used as a means of grace. "And since he disapproved of confirmation as a special service, he saw no need for a special order."⁹ This again reflects Luther's desire for formal education of all Christians without attaching significance to the ritual itself.

During the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe (the time before Lutherans immigrated to the United States of America), most towns had one congregation and therefore one common religion among the people. Catechesis was a shorter and less intense process because everyday life (school, church, and social) was indoctrination into

⁷ Arthur Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 19.

⁸ Kent Gilbert, *Confirmation and Education*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 58.

⁹ Martin Luther, "The Order of Baptism, 1523," in *Liturgy and Hymns* ed. Ulrich S. Leupold; trans. Paul Zeller Strodach; vol. 53 of Luther's Works, American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 93.

a particular way of thinking about the world and faith. The process of catechesis was simple and common among the people. “The catechumens were expected to know from memory Luther’s *Small Catechism* without explanation.”¹⁰ Memorization was a critical tool for teaching in a time when even many of the clergy were not literate. People today are becoming increasingly more literate while perhaps becoming more biblically illiterate. Memorization can be a good first step in grasping the content of biblical doctrine. If students can memorize all the words from a movie surely they can be challenged to memorize key passages of scripture or doctrine.

There has always been great variance between the practices of catechesis in Lutheran congregations once arriving in America. In Europe, there was a common culture, language, and centrality among churches. Even among families there was very little diversity of religion or culture. In American cities, Lutheran families found themselves surrounded by churches of many denominational flavors and people from various backgrounds. Unless a congregation formed a parochial school, the church could no longer depend on schools to assist in discipleship of children. Lutheran confirmation was no longer an accepted cultural rite as it had been in Europe. Confirmation instruction now had to address more than just the difference between the teachings of Luther and the Roman Catholic Church. Suddenly Lutherans found themselves in a melting pot of world cultures and philosophies. “The child is made more keenly aware of the concern which his parents and fellow Christians have for his spiritual welfare.”¹¹ Confirmation became a counter-cultural experience needed to keep future generations from leaving their faith.

¹⁰ Repp, 182.

¹¹ Ibid., 178.

There were certain expectations that were usually found in all Lutheran congregations. These expectations continue to be common among congregations today. Practically all pastors were agreed on two things: (1) that the instruction was the real confirmation and the ceremony merely the public recognition that the catechumen had the knowledge necessary for his first Communion and (2) that the instruction was to be based primarily on Luther's "Small Catechism"¹² The process itself also had common practices among churches. Confirmation always included "instruction in the Word, the confession of faith, and the intercession of the congregation, accompanied by the laying on of hands."¹³

Arthur Repp spent much of his research on studying the practice of confirmation throughout history. He identified six primary models of confirmation practiced in the Lutheran Church since the time of Luther. While many of the churches refused to call their catechesis process confirmation because they wanted to show a rejection of the Roman Catholic rite, the intentional instruction using a common framework was practiced. While there was no uniform pattern throughout churches, the six models developed through "a complex number of personalities, influences, and cultural forces."¹⁴

The catechetical type was modeled not only through special classes, but regularly from the front with the whole congregation. This type emphasized the need for whole families to memorize the core teachings on a regular basis at home. "The three important elements of the catechetical type were instruction, an examination for demonstrating

¹² Ibid., 130.

¹³ Ibid., 179.

¹⁴ Sengele, 12.

preparation for the Lord's Supper, and a confession of faith accompanied by prayers of the congregation."¹⁵ Full acceptance into the community was centered by instruction that led to reception at the Lord's Supper.

The hierarchical type was introduced in the early 16th century by Martin Bucer. Bucer spent much of his ministry in Strassburg undergoing criticism of Anabaptists and other more radical reformers. "Their charge was that his church baptized children who were too young to have a personal faith, which then led to moral laxity."¹⁶ Bucer responded by emphasizing a public testimony of faith that included a vow of submission to the authority of the church. In this way, Bucer insisted that having a process of instruction in place that ended with a public confession of faith was necessary for churches that baptize infants.

The third model of confirmation used in Lutheran history was the sacramental type. This type built on the teachings of Bucer that confirmation is a public confession of faith in Christ and the active submission to the authority of the church. "This form of confirmation retained elements of the Roman Catholic tradition, such as a bestowing of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands as a completion of Holy Baptism and the conferral of a fuller membership in the Church not given in Baptism."¹⁷ This model ignored Luther's desire to emphasize instruction rather than the rite.

The traditional type disconnected confirmation from first communion, and instead put the focus on confirming a childhood Baptism. Philip Melanchthon, author of the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

Augsburg Confession, encouraged this view because confirmation was never commanded by Jesus and thus could not be considered a sacrament. “Instead, confirmation is a rite received from the Fathers, which the Church does not require as necessary for salvation.”¹⁸ Melanchthon primarily wanted to maintain high standards of doctrinal understanding among the church and was even prepared to invite children to the Lord’s Supper before confirmation. Melanchthon worked throughout his career to improve the role of teaching both within the church and in German schools. To Melanchthon, a “teacher was viewed as a protector of truth and justice who served both church and state.”¹⁹

The pietistic type developed strength after many of the communities in Germany were all baptized Lutherans. Philip Spener believed faith had become all about instruction and knowledge. Spener wanted to see Lutherans living out their faith in more outward ways and believed much of Lutheran teaching was done because it was simply a part of the culture and not because people had personal faith. “For him, a living faith was one that led to a conversion of the heart expressed in conviction, fellowship, and service.”²⁰ For pietistic scholars, the key was the demonstration of a genuine conversion.

The rationalistic type developed in the eighteenth-century in Germany as a response to philosophical trends in society. Suddenly religious teaching had to be grasped through the rationalistic worldview at the time. “Instead of memorizing and then

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ William Rietschel, *An Introduction to the Foundations of Lutheran Education* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Academic Press, 2000), 23.

²⁰ Sengele, 14.

understanding, the order was reversed by emphasizing comprehension.”²¹ Confirmation suddenly became a central focus for both the pastor and the congregation. This was the place people were taught to respond to a worldview that demanded that religious truth be proved.

Lutheran immigrants carried the influences of these different models with them when arriving in the United States of America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. C. F. W. Walther, the president and leader of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, wanted to set up a centralized body that provided materials and training to help unify teaching. Walther also believed that the assumptions of Rationalism needed to be rejected in favor of emphasis on the power of the word of God. Concordia Publishing House was established in 1869 as the official publishing arm of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. It was in this new culture and land that churches began to use common materials and methods fashioned by the centralized church body.

Teaching Faith Today

“Confirmation remains for the typical Lutheran congregation a tradition-oriented program whereby the young are allegedly trained for future membership and participation in the congregation of their training.”²² While most churches still have this model in place, they are facing challenges because of the mobility and diversity of the modern family. Because of our increasingly mobile culture we are no longer training people to participate in our congregation for more than maybe a few years. You can also no longer assume that either parent was exposed to Lutheran confirmation as children.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gilbert, 98.

Confirmation today has to teach the cultural and historical background as much as it has to teach the content of the basic doctrine. Increasingly there is no longer a unifying story among people in Lutheran churches.

Additionally, advancements in developmental psychology have changed the way many in the church see catechesis. In the latter half of the twentieth century, “a commission of the three main Lutheran churches in North America recommended significant changes in the practice of confirmation.”²³ Curriculum is beginning to seriously address the role of the learner in the process of catechesis. No longer can a teacher merely lecture on Luther’s catechism and expect spiritual transformation in others. “Confirmation, if it is to be understood as an educational ministry, and I think that it should be, should be defined in terms of the content of the faith to be taught as well as the self-identity of the confirmand.”²⁴ Ministers who teach confirmation need to focus time on the intersection of the content of faith with the self-identity of the individual. Luther famously asked the question “what does this mean?” Perhaps religious teachers need to begin asking “what does this mean for them?” when preparing lessons for students.

Summary

Teaching and preaching today need to pay attention to how content relates to the world the student lives in today. “Confirmation education needs to reconcile a closed, past-centered content with a flexible, future-oriented function.”²⁵ The goal is to form the

²³ Jeffrey A. Truscott, *The Reform of Baptism and Confirmation in American Lutheranism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 127.

²⁴ Gilbert, 59.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

student with the history of the past so that they may embrace the future with maturity and wisdom. While the church may not be able to predict what changes will happen in future culture, it can form the student to answer them holistically.

It is also important that catechesis addresses the issues that are important to youth. “Confirmation education must be related to the drives and motivations which stir youth.”²⁶ It is important to answer the questions that youth are actually asking. Today’s youth want to change the world and the classroom should be a time to help them realize what God wants for the world. Programs need to offer opportunities for students to engage in the activities related to topics being discussed. A discussion on Christian charity needs to extend into opportunities to serve at a soup kitchen, sing carols at a nursing home, donate items to the community homeless shelter, and restock the local food pantry.

Confirmation must become a part of a faith development plan that spans throughout the life of the believer. If it is the only program we require for membership in the church, then it is likely to be the only thing people attend. There needs to be a next step after confirmation so that the learner continues to grow and feed their faith. Much like the early church, churches should lay the foundations of Christian doctrine in order to admit people into full participation in the church, while at the same time increasing their desire to know and experience more about Christian life.

Discipleship must focus on the development of spiritual habits as much as on the mastery of core doctrine. Students should be encouraged to not only learn about the bible, prayer, or fasting, but also to experience each. It is much easier to remember a habit than

²⁶ Ibid., 113.

to remember a definition. It is far too easy to turn faith into a subject to be studied rather than an experience to be lived out. Tactile learners in particular will benefit from experiencing the practices and rituals of the Christian faith.

Faith needs to be lived out beyond the classroom. Students need a chance to learn about life and faith from people other than the minister. Just like in the early church, parents need to be encouraged to take this journey with their child. The more the topics of faith relate to the home and everyday life, the more the students will embrace the experience. Students must also begin to experience the different programs and opportunities for service available at their local congregation so that these rhythms are established before they are received into full participation.

Lutheran churches can honor their traditions by teaching Luther's *Small Catechism* to future generations, but only they learn to do so in the language of the people. To teach a new culture you must first learn the language of the new culture. This essay will propose that discipleship today requires a return to the visual and tangible techniques Jesus utilized in his own teaching. If you allow learners to taste, see, touch, smell and experience the metaphors of scripture you help them engage, remember, and implement its teachings.

SECTION 2: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Introduction

The Internet age is forcing traditional education to reevaluate everything. “It is an understatement to say that higher education is caught in a time of disruptive change.”²⁷

The landscape of education and learning are emerging in ways that put pressure on traditional academic models. While many are trying new ways of adapting education for a digital age, there is no consistent model proven to help organizations with effectiveness. “Every institution must take its history, traditions, strengths, and weaknesses into account when styling a response to the coming digital era.”²⁸ Any proposed solution must prove effective or risk being discarded.

No organization struggles to implement its history and traditions into the digital era more than the church. The traditional church has long been known as the people of the book, but is now finding it hard to identify as people of the screen. In particular, the protestant church formed its foundations and traditions during the same age that public education became a normalizing factor in society. Styles of worship, preaching, catechesis, and classroom management for churches modeled and were modeling those in schools. The protestant church and public education had similar trajectories and academic models throughout their history, and now both feel the stress that the modern technological movement has put on their strategies. The church functioned comfortably

²⁷ Peter Smith, “Digital Disruption: Transformational Change Is Pushing Higher Education Leaders to Rethink the Traditional Organizational Model in Ways That Align with the Digital Age,” *Business Officer* 51, no. 1 (2017): 75, accessed November 13, 2017, Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost.

²⁸ Ibid.

in the age of lectures by experts and information from academic books. Now it must find its voice in a technological world that gives every user a voice and every perspective a chance. Degrees, endowed faculty chairs, and book contracts no longer guarantee that a voice or perspective will be heard in the technological age. People with an important message must find a way to “go viral” or risk losing their influence. However, there will always be perspectives that resist the need to adjust methods.

Retraining the Student for a Traditional Classroom

Many clergy believe that the medium used to communicate the message will alter the message. Because of this, they are skeptical that catechesis can be divorced from its traditional method of educational roots. While catechesis certainly began well before the age of printed text, most of the modern day protestant denominations and their catechetical traditions began during this age. Introducing a fluid and constantly changing medium like the Internet into any classroom certainly comes with some loss of control for the teacher. Instead of one core textbook (which was previously approved by the teacher) the students will have sufficient and immediate access to countless perspectives on a particular topic of life and faith. For a pastor who is accustomed to having controlled content from a denominational source, it may seem haphazard to allow online content that has not been filtered by the church body of a denomination. If online access is allowed then it is impossible to sufficiently filter the content to the teacher’s liking.

For many clergy the simplest solution is to avoid any use of technology in the catechetical process. They prefer the traditional classroom because they believe the students will have less distraction and will be forced to focus on the material before them. The traditional classroom also cooperates best with their personal training, experience,

and the materials readily available to them. They also know that a traditional classroom provides opportunity for traditional human interaction between students and with the teacher. It is their understanding that proper emotional interaction happens best when people are physically gathered together (as opposed to online cohorts). Rather than the class adapting to the student, they expect the student to adapt to the style of the class. This allows the teacher to retain control over all content for the students.

Messiah Lutheran Classical Academy is a Christian school in Keller, Texas that largely embraces this methodology.²⁹ Their mission is to mold and shape the minds of students through a Christian worldview taught through classical education. They believe that adapting the student to the style of the class is a more developmentally appropriate way that capitalizes on the way that God designed people to think. A current renaissance of this style of education is spreading, especially in homeschool settings. Scholars, like Dr. Christopher Perrin, understand that brains are responsive and adaptable to stimuli and thus want them to become optimized for classical behavior.³⁰ Avoiding digital stimulus and reading classic books is their preferred strategy.

The real challenge with this method is whether digital thinkers can rewire their brains to effectively learn in this environment. Is it possible to avoid digital stimulus in the modern world sufficiently to optimize brains for classical education? Retraining students to focus in a traditional classroom will require major parental assistance that is increasingly a scarce resource. Issues will emerge regarding problems with focus, retention, and behavior. This method also assumes that digital interaction is inherently flawed compared with physical interaction. It ignores the legitimacy of online social

²⁹ www.mlcatexas.org.

³⁰ www.insideclassicaled.com.

settings and is biased toward traditional social settings. It assumes a party is a better place to get to know a prospective spouse than an online dating site, and therefore it assumes a brick and mortar classroom is a better learning environment than an online cohort.

Adapting Catechesis and Technology for the Classroom

Other teachers also understand that the medium can influence the message, but they see no hope in trying to retrain digital thinkers for a traditional classroom. Therefore, their goal is to incorporate technology to help adapt the delivery of catechesis so that digital thinkers can understand it. Since technology is now a central part of everyday life, it should also be incorporated into a classroom setting as a normal part of education. Whether it is in public education or in a religious classroom, new tools are developing rapidly today to equip teachers in the digital age. These new tools challenge teachers to redevelop their skills and responsibilities in the teacher role. Mastery of subject matter is no longer the key prerequisite for effective teaching since digital tools are increasingly becoming more than merely partial constituents in the learning environment.

While new tools are being produced rapidly for digital classrooms, pastors in traditional churches often notice that their publishing houses do not produce enough digital catechetical material for them. They are often forced to look outside their denominational roots at nonaffiliated publishing houses that specialize in digital media. For Lutheran churches the doctrine of these materials often does not reflect the unique sacramental approach to the theology of Lutheran catechesis. Additionally, these materials may effectively communicate with the students but they fail to bridge the

important relationship between students and the teacher. The best approach needs to not replace the teacher but rather connect the teacher with the students.

The New City Catechism is an advanced tool helping students learn the core doctrines of Christianity.³¹ The mobile version takes questions and answers from traditional catechisms and pairs them with Bible readings, prayers, commentary, and songs to help with memorization. By retaining the catechetical discipline of memorization, yet making it accessible in a mobile version, The New City Catechism is able to reinforce its traditional curriculum and books with this resource. Faith Inkubators is also developing quality digital resources to equip teachers to engage students in the ways their brains actually learn.³² This resource is an exceptional example of encouraging intergenerational learning environments and building a unified community. While both of these resources offer assistance for a traditional classroom, neither promotes digital community. It also questionable whether wrapping older curriculum in digital clothes measurably advances connection with digital learners.

Outsourcing Catechesis to Experts

A third proposed solution is to outsource catechesis to experts in modern education. With this method, churches employ experts to communicate with digital learners. In some cases, a church may choose to hire a youth minister with special skills in translating traditional content of catechesis for use with students. This solution puts a lot of trust in an individual to properly translate content. When an additional salary is not

³¹ www.newcitycatechism.com.

³² www.crossgenlife.org/.

possible, smaller churches are forced to outsource their students to special conferences and larger communities where experts are at work.

This solution also creates a necessity to departmentalize the members of a church. Group publishing is a good example of producing quality resources for age-differentiated classrooms.³³ While the curriculum is designed to be user-friendly for lay and professional teachers alike, its design separates age groups and works best in larger contexts where set designs and performances are able to be professionally illustrated and choreographed. It ups the performance value without fully addressing the change thinking styles. If the youth minister effectively teaches catechesis to digital learners, perhaps they will see the need to departmentalize other activities in the church such as prayer, worship, preaching, service, and evangelism. This solution leads to a fragmented community that cannot communicate and coexist across generations.

Summary

None of the alternative solutions has proven effective for churches. Discipleship is far more than just teaching people religious content effectively. It is also important to equip them to work together as the body of Christ in the world. Any solution that does not promote intergenerational ministry fragments the body of Christ and threatens trust and stability within a community. Older Christians and younger Christians need each other just as a hand needs an arm to function.

Additionally, each of these methods biases physical community as superior to digital community. They ignore the possibility that for many people open and lasting relationships can be formed in a digital environment, and that in the near future nearly all

³³ www.group.com.

generations will live significant portions of their lives online. Technology has changed the way the world works and therefore has changed how the church needs to work within that world.

SECTION 3: THE THESIS

Introduction

Technology has changed the way people live. The world is now a global community that can be accessed through the Internet from anywhere. Technology has changed the way people shop, give, communicate, bank, and work. It has also increased the need for continual education as students try to gain the knowledge they need as their tasks change. The Internet has changed the way people socialize thus changing priorities and perspectives in relationships. People are more connected (through social networking and mobile communication) and more isolated (because there is less need for physical interaction to maintain relationships) at the same time.

Technology has also changed the way people think. Gaming, texting, and posting are now normal activities in today's world and the results are brains that think and process information and images differently. Internet addiction has hurt memory retention, has made people less empathetic, and encourages procrastination. However, it also provides a unique training ground to develop skills (like from video games) that education, government, and health organizations are now using to make innovating advances in their fields.

While the American education system has been working to utilize the power and impact of the digital age, the church has hardly given it any attention. Technology will continue to advance and innovate, and it is essential that the church learns how to channel the culture's digital skills into a tool for spiritual practice. In order to be successful, the church will need to understand how brains are being changed by Internet use, learn the

language of the digital age, and adopt critical methods that modern educators are using to teach digital learners. The church needs to become a “digital disciple” of Jesus Christ.

The church must adapt in every culture. This has been the case throughout history. When immigrant Christians from other nations came to the United States of America they quickly discovered they had to learn English in order to speak and learn in their new culture. The goal today is to learn how to communicate effectively so digital thinkers become stronger disciples of Jesus Christ.

Real communication, business, and innovation are happening in the digital world and they have changed the way the culture thinks and works. The church has much to learn from current educational theory and needs to begin to filter its information through digital, multi-sensory, narrative, and experiential methods of education. Utilizing metaphor, parable, and proverb as a part of the teaching strategy will help communicators be more effective teachers for digital learners.

Because of the great changes in society, it is important to recognize why some forms of communication effectively reach digital thinkers. One of the best strategies communicators can use to reach today’s learners is to embrace the teaching style of Jesus. Jesus taught with image-rich narratives in multi-sensory environments. He understood why brains respond with more engagement to metaphor, parable, and proverb. His highest priority was helping his students experience a concept experientially rather than just as information.

Jesus chose metaphors that wired his new stories into the biblical narrative of Israel. He knew that it is possible for a sermon to be very engaging and yet ineffective. His goal was not for students to regurgitate knowledge, but rather for them to experience

connections personally. By developing fresh metaphors in current context and culture, teachers can craft experiences that produce stronger disciples in the world today.

Metaphor, parable, and proverb have the power to translate the timeless message of God for a world of digital thinkers.

Brain Research

Technology changes what we need to personally memorize and recall by making information easily accessible and organized. Future engineers will not be the people who can remember algorithms but rather people who can use software that does calculations in a fraction of the time. Future accountants will not be the people with mathematic brains that can process numbers in their heads but rather people skilled to operate complex accounting programs. This possibility extends to nearly every conceivable career and venture in the world today. “Just as reading was made necessary by the printing press and arithmetic by the introduction of money, so computer technologies are changing the very ways we think and make sense of the world.”³⁴ Digital technology will be absolutely necessary to solve the complex problems of the future.

The world of gaming is a significant area where digital technology has changed the way people learn. Users have the ability to interact in virtual reality and to experience different outcomes based on their actions. This is a world where people can simulate experience and teach values to people without real-world consequences. “Complex games give users rich feedback on the consequences of a series of actions or a strategy

³⁴ Allen Collins and Richard Halverson, *Rethinking Education in the Age of Technology: The Digital Revolution and the Schools* (New York: Teacher College Press, 2009), 11.

for interaction.”³⁵ The hope is that experiencing negative consequences in a virtual experience might lead to a society that makes better decisions in real situations. Gaming also helps the user boost brain power and multitasking skills. Research is currently being done to find out exactly why gamers perform better than non-gamers on certain tests of speed, attention, accuracy, and vision. Teachers and business leaders are increasingly realizing that some of the best ways to train and equip their people include interactive, multi-player games.

The Internet is often criticized because its content has not been filtered by the academic world. A person does not need a degree or experience to be influential. However, debating the validity of its content is perhaps less important than discovering the power of the medium itself. The Internet has changed the way we process and think. “As our window onto the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it – and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society.”³⁶ The uses and purpose of our brains are now different because of the medium of the Internet. It is precisely because people now think differently that they will need to learn differently.

We are now “at an important juncture in our intellectual and cultural history, a moment of transition between two very different modes of thinking.”³⁷ This transition has created negative tension between new thinkers and old ways of doing things. People have become more distracted and unable to pay attention for even minimal amounts of time.

³⁵ Ibid., 19.

³⁶ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, Ltd., 2010), 3.

³⁷ Ibid, 10.

When away from the Internet our brains desire to be fed more and more information. “Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts – the faster, the better.”³⁸ What started out as a feeling that people noticed from their habits has now become something that is absolutely necessary to study scientifically. The tasks that we will be able to successfully perform are changing because of the ways our brains are being trained by digital technology.

Modern science shows that the human brain is very adaptable to stimuli even in adults, however scientists have not always agreed with that conclusion. “The conception of the adult brain as an unchanging physical apparatus grew out of, and was buttressed by, an Industrial Age metaphor that represented the brain as a mechanical contraption.”³⁹ Modern science can now show evidence for the plasticity of the brain, and this may show why the Internet changes the way the brain reprograms itself. “Every time we perform a task or experience a sensation, whether physical or mental, a set of neurons in our brains is activated.”⁴⁰ With enough exposure the brain actually changes and adapts to be more functionally able to work in a particular circumstance. Perhaps Descartes and Jesus were both right – “we are what we think” (or we become what we think about). If the brain is exposed to digital technology in normal life then it will become adapted to that way of thinking and operating. Thus to get the most out of a person’s talents and skills will

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

require allowing the brain to work the way it works best. The results are brains that are rewired for a new, digital world.

The adaptability of the brain from its birth-given genetic makeup can be a good thing and a bad thing. “It comes as no surprise that neuroplasticity has been linked to mental afflictions ranging from depression to obsessive-compulsive disorder to tinnitus.”⁴¹ Repetition, whether it is from memorizing words on a page or from repeated stimulus from addictive drugs, causes changes to brain circuitry. The Internet’s unique power comes from its bidirectional interaction with the user. It “provides a high-speed system for delivering responses and rewards – ‘positive reinforcements,’ in psychological terms – which encourage the repetition of both physical and mental actions.”⁴² This reinforcement has allowed for the strengthening of certain cognitive skills while also neglecting other cognitive skills. The very pathways of the brain are becoming wired differently thus giving our minds new skills along with new weaknesses.

Socrates predicted that memories would weaken when people began to write things down. His prediction would prove to be just as true in the age of the Internet. We no longer memorize information that is easily accessible on the Internet. In fact, society now views the modern mind much like that of a computer. Our “biological memory functions like a hard drive, storing bits of data in fixed locations and serving them up as inputs to the brain’s calculations, then offloading that storage capacity to the Web,” so that we can save our memories for only the most important of tasks.⁴³ While this

⁴¹ Ibid., 35.

⁴² Ibid., 117.

⁴³ Ibid., 182.

metaphor is not entirely true, it does depict that society is very reliant on digital technology and that we now use our brains differently. This change is both functional (how people want to use their brains) and physical (how brains are now working). This plasticity is fundamental to “how our brain cells, or neurons, connect to one another.”⁴⁴ Learning a new word is really a neuron associating an unknown thing with a known thing. Knowledge is learned by comparison. The more we learn the more the neurons in the brain connect to one another like a tree blooming with leaves on many branches. Smarter people have brain branches that bloom with connections that form images and experiences into each other. “As our use of the Web makes it harder for us to lock information into our biological memory, we’re forced to rely more and more on the Net’s capacious and easily searchable artificial memory, even if it makes us shallower thinkers.”⁴⁵

While the modern world might be producing shallower thinkers in one sense, it is also training up thinkers than can solve more complex problems. The ability to work and think with digital technology has created workers that are significantly more efficient and skilled at solving these problems. If the brain truly has changed the way in which it is wired and the way it thinks, society may have no choice but to embrace digital technology both in education and in the work place. People can at the same time be shallower thinkers as well as more efficient and adaptable thinkers. The world is more complex and globally conscience and the education required to functionally succeed is different from the past.

⁴⁴ John Ratey, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2008), 36.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

Education in a Digital Age

Language can mean many things. It is both intellectual and social. Intellectually, language is the way an individual processes and organizes information. Language is also the way we express the social conventions shared between different individuals.⁴⁶ It tends to change and evolve when more complex problems develop in a culture. Human language expands when more complex communication is needed.

To communicate in a new culture you must first learn the language of the new culture. The language of culture today does not communicate merely with words. “The new literacy extends the symbolic decoding and manipulation skills of print media by integrating video, images, music, and animation comprehension that give rise to new kinds of production.”⁴⁷ This language is not being developed in an academic setting, but rather in the decentralized world of the Internet. The video that receives the most attention is the one that will help guide the rules and norms for the new digital language of the culture. Just as Martin Luther’s translation of the New Testament helped solidify the modern German language, so has interaction on the Internet helped to establish new norms for communication today.

Language in the digital age is still developing since it is in its infancy. However, there are certain trends that will continue. “To prepare students to communicate in this emerging world requires not simply the traditional reading and writing, but learning how to communicate using different media with people who do not share the same

⁴⁶ James Gee and Elisabeth Hayes, *Language and Learning in the Digital Age* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 6.

⁴⁷ Collins, 13.

assumptions.”⁴⁸ Language is interactive, and only through experience learning the customs of the online community can someone effectively communicate. “Language is, and always has been, both a social tool and an information tool.”⁴⁹ It is important to embrace this so that we view the Internet as a new form of reality and social interaction.

Digital technology uses a platform of communication that is closer to an oral culture than a written culture. Digital technology has the ability to communicate through image and metaphor, which is more natural for our brains. “Digital media (like text messaging, Twitter, and other social media) are, in a sense, bringing language back to its conversational, interactive, here-and-now foundations.”⁵⁰ The ability to interpret more readily and clearly should help social interaction become both more efficient and complex at the same time. This is the real key to enhancing education. When we learn and utilize a language that works more naturally with our brains, we have the best chance to facilitate learning.

Digital technology has also changed the way written language operates. “People can communicate at great distances in real time through the Internet and various sorts of social media.”⁵¹ This is a unique pattern of written language that allows it to be more interactive like a real dialogue. A new way of communicating is here because a global world needs it to be here. Digital technology crosses both language and cultural barriers normally found in oral and print media, and it has given us the ability to more effectively create and collaborate across geographical borders.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Gee, 24.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., 125.

There will always be a pragmatic pressure to make language more useful and therefore more informal. Advances in technology, business, and worldwide communication have assisted greatly in valuing that pragmatic approach to language. Mediums like Twitter and text messaging encourage misspelling and other grammatical shortcuts to make sure the writer keeps messages under a 140-character limit. However it would be too simplistic to assume language is dying. Language has adapted dynamically from its start as oral, then printed, and now digital. While digital language has its flaws, it must be noted how easily reproducible and shareable it has become. It is also a key force in helping the global world communicate effectively together.

Modern educators need to be aware of the challenges of education in a digital age. Learning has moved beyond the walls of the school and the opinions of professors. Learning is more than just the transfer of information. Classical education too often ignored the need for learning in community. Legitimate Peripheral Participation taught educators that “learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice.”⁵² If people spend time using technology as a social practice then they will learn from that technology. Education does not necessarily need new pedagogies as much as it needs to recognize the new social communities and accessibility found in the Internet age. At the same time it is important to evaluate and know today’s digital learner. When people are online, they “enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning.”⁵³ Educators have never been more challenged to redesign learning experiences in order to help students become successful learners.

⁵² Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31.

⁵³ Carr, 116.

Educators that embrace digital technology are finding it has an advantage in creating more dialogue in education. Dialogic theory believes it is precisely in creating these opportunities that true education begins to flourish. “In dialogic space there is an overlapping of perspectives in which selves interpenetrate in order to be able to share and persuade.”⁵⁴ The Internet has the unique ability to bring many different voices and perspectives to the same table all in real time. While this dialogue may not lead to uniform thought (it will in fact sometimes lead to more polarizing opinions), it can help us find a more global intelligence and awareness.

Many educators are finding alternative methods of education to be far more effective at working with low-achieving students. These students have opportunities to work on practical applications or projects that are often worked on collaboratively. “Along with their regular teachers, they work with people from other fields as mentors and role models: engineers, scientists, technologists, artists, musicians, business leaders, and so on.”⁵⁵ These types of experiments prove that students succeed when they are given the opportunity to do the work over and above studying the theory from a textbook. Babies can learn a complex language just from being exposed to it, and yet we have often failed to expose students to a learning environment that is both “practical and demonstrable.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Rupert Wegerif, *Dialogic: Education for the Internet Age* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 150.

⁵⁵ Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica, *Creative School: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education* (New York: Viking Press, 2015), 30.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

Modern educators are also focusing on redesigning the facilities where they educate. Schools are spending more time and finances to make sure that school buildings reflect the style and methodology of the modern educator.

School design should communicate the type of learning that is happening inside the facility. It does this by reflecting the nature of the students and how they approach learning with their educators. For Net Gens, that means shifting away from traditional constructs and objects and moving toward interactive and digital ones.⁵⁷

Schools that display student art have moved away from community boards in the hallways and are now using digital monitors to display and capture the work students are doing. The most innovative schools are working hard to make sure digital media is fully integrated throughout the school with the use of interactive displays and other forms of digital technology.

Modern educators will fail their students if they do not realize that students learn in different ways. Digital technology provides opportunities for teachers to reach different learners at the same time with different content and approaches.

If we acknowledge that all children learn differently, then the way schooling is arranged – in a monolithic batch-mode system where all students are taught the same things on the same day in the same way – won't ever allow us to educate children in customized ways. We need a modular system.⁵⁸

This is the key to all education reform, whether it is in public schools or in the church. Using the right tools to facilitate change will enable teachers to better manage the whole classroom while also addressing students individually.

⁵⁷ Todd Ferking, "Teaching and Learning in a Digital Age," *School Planning & Management* 54, no. 9 (2015): 32, accessed December 13, 2015, EBSCOhost.

⁵⁸ Clayton Christensen, Michael Horn, and Curtis Johnson, *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 243.

Perhaps the biggest change happening in education is the adaptability of the teachers who are mentoring and guiding students. If teachers are not willing to adapt their teaching to reach students then education will cease to be effective. The best teachers “are mentors and guides who can raise the confidence of their students, help them find a sense of direction, and empower them to believe in themselves.”⁵⁹ These teachers are able to see learning as a collective endeavor between themselves and their students. They realize students are connected “24/7/365” and so they seek out opportunities to be connected themselves. This does not mean that it always happens smoothly. Many educators “find that although school districts are increasingly adopting plans to include technology in school at scale, much less is understood about how to support teachers and students in creating and participating in mutually supportive, online, and physically situated learning spaces.”⁶⁰ It is this support that will make sure the money and time being spent is being done for the right reasons and that the digital learner is truly being educated and empowered.

The impact of bringing public education into the digital age has been expensive and has often failed. Teachers have often been given resources without proper training or purpose. However, the experience of these early adopters of technology in education has given “us a clearer understanding of how teachers work through the process of integrating the first generation of ubiquitous networked computer technology into

⁵⁹ Robinson, 109.

⁶⁰ Kimberley Gomez and Ung-Sang Lee, “Situating Cognition and Learning Environments: Implications for Teachers On- and Offline in the New Digital Media Age,” *Interactive Learning Environments* 23, no. 5: 649, accessed December 13, 2015, Education Research Complete, EBSCOhost.

classroom instruction.”⁶¹ These early pioneers have essentially paved a road for modern education that is far smoother and accessible. The Internet is now a normal and essential tool for work, education, and life. Even churches have realized the importance of having an online presence. “As computer technology continues to penetrate all aspects of our lives, the transition to using technology in our classrooms may not be as dramatic or difficult as was once predicted.”⁶² It is exactly this transition into using technology more effectively that the church must take seriously.

The church has always worked hard to learn the language of the people and has even gone to great effort to make sure its scriptures were translated into the language of the people. It now faces a great challenge to learn the language of the digital age. It is conclusive that the use of social media as both a teaching tool and as a ministry tool is absolutely necessary now that it is fully integrated into society. “This is something that longstanding faith groups are slowly coming to terms with, institutionally and individually.”⁶³ When the church rejects or refuses to engage in social media it is therefore refusing to reach the people where they are living their lives. “Social media is particularly identified with its ability to span temporal and spatial boundaries” and if the

⁶¹ Kathleen Burns and Joseph Polman, “The Impact of Ubiquitous Computing in the Internet Age: How Middle School Teachers Integrated Wireless Laptops in the Initial Stages of Implementation.” *Journal of Technology & Teacher Education* 14, no. 2: 364, accessed December 13, 2015, Education Research Complete, EBSCOhost.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 383.

⁶³ Bex Lewis, “MediaLit: Engaging Faith and Media in a Digital Age,” *Proceedings of the European Conference On E-Learning*, 271, accessed December 13, 2015, Education Research Complete, EBSCOhost.

church is able to embrace this it may provide untold ability to effectively evangelize and provide missionary efforts of the future.⁶⁴

Secondly, the church needs to utilize digital technology in order to learn more about the daily lives of its people. “Digital technology has changed what is possible for Christian leaders to experience, offering opportunities to engage (or be on call) to parishioners around the clock.”⁶⁵ Social media has created the opportunity for instant access to everything happening in the lives of people, and if properly utilized, could provide pastors the chance to better and more personally minister to their people. Unlike traditional media, when a church becomes a consumer of social media it has instant interaction with its people in a bidirectional exchange of information. To say it simply, if the church is absent from social media then it will also be absent from many of its people’s lives.

Finally, if the church wants to reach a digital learner it needs to value the role of student experimentation. Pastors should be curious about the topics on the minds of the students and give them space to work on it, even if imperfectly. Church education should be “a place where mistakes are allowed, tangents are encouraged, and big thinking is celebrated as a process – whatever the outcome might turn out to be.”⁶⁶ Even in the area of adopting a wider scope of social media usage the church will have many obstacles. The Internet is filled with both helpful and unhelpful content, and associating with it has

⁶⁴ Ibid., 273.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 275.

⁶⁶ Salman Khan, *The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined* (New York: Twelve, 2013), 251.

its risks. To do so the church must properly and intentionally plan and train its people in order to minimize resistance.

The church has always had to adapt to culture. When German Lutherans came to America they had to learn English in order to speak to the culture around them. When the automobile was invented missionaries had to give up riding horses. When the printing press was invented one of the first things it printed was the bible because it became too inefficient to continue to hand copy bibles. The church has always adapted to culture because it knows its message is the most important one in the world. The digital world did not exist in previous generations. And we must be careful not to categorize this phenomenon as a real world versus a digital world debate. The fact is real conversation, real business, and real innovation happens in the digital world. The digital world is made up of real people who need to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church must now embrace its power, be wise to its weaknesses, and adapt its methodology for use in its evangelism in order to continue to reach the culture around it. If used well, the Internet has the opportunity to become the greatest tool of evangelism and discipleship ever used in human history.

Anti-drug commercials from the 1980's depicted a sizzling egg on a griddle with the phrase "this is your brain on drugs". Society discovered that outside factors could actually change the brain chemistry and rewire how the brain actually works. Maybe it is time to start teacher education courses with a commercial that shows a graphic depiction of a brain being rewired with the phrase "this is your brain on the World Wide Web". This popular medium has changed how we see the world and who we are as a society.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Carr, 3.

Science shows evidence for the plasticity of the brain and that Internet usage changes the way the brain reprograms itself. “Every time we perform a task or experience a sensation, whether physical or mental, a set of neurons in our brains is activated.”⁶⁸ With enough exposure the brain adapts to be functionally able to work in a particular circumstance. Harnessing the most of a person’s talents and skills requires allowing brains to work most proficiently.

Because the brain is changing the way it is wired and the way it thinks, educators have begun to embrace digital technology both in education and in the work place. The ability to work and think with digital technology has created workers that are significantly more efficient and skilled at solving complex problems. Digital technology uses a platform of communication that is closer to an oral culture than a written culture. Digital technology has the ability to communicate through image and metaphor, which is more natural for our brains. “Digital media (like text messaging, Twitter, and other social media) are, in a sense, bringing language back to its conversational, interactive, here-and-now foundations.”⁶⁹

Educators teach digital thinkers by engaging them with visual and tangible techniques. The more they let them taste, see, touch, smell and experience their subject matter, the more students are able to engage, remember, and implement the teachings. The most effective teachers adapt their role from dispenser of information to guiding mentor as students explore information on their own. These teachers practice learning as a collective endeavor between themselves and their students. Digital technology provides

⁶⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁹ Gee, 12.

opportunities for teachers to reach different learners at the same time with different content and approaches.

The brain learns through association of new concepts with things already experienced. This process of prediction works in much the same way as old telephone companies. They made connections between phones by plugging wires in a certain way. Scientific work in the visual cortex and single nerve cells show us how brains make these predictions. “We can see the brain predicting in this way if we look directly at the activity in nerve cells.”⁷⁰ Nerve cells are signaling devices that help create mental maps between things experienced. Learning is a process of using prior knowledge and making prejudiced guesses of new information. “Prejudice might be a dirty word these days, but it is in fact crucial for our brains to function.”⁷¹ Prejudice and prediction are far more accurate when communicating with someone who has a similar education and background as the speaker. “Biases may be beneficial for separating out bits of experience into categories, sharpening categorical boundaries, and otherwise helping us create conceptual structure above and beyond that offered by the world.”⁷²

People communicate metaphorically when the brain puts ideas or objects into linguistic containers called words. Metaphor “refers to a cross-domain mapping [from a source domain onto a target domain] in the conceptual system.”⁷³ The brain is also able to

⁷⁰ Chris Frith, *Making Up the Mind: How the Brain Creates Our Mental World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 92.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷² Lera Boroditsky, “Comparison and the Development of Knowledge,” *Cognition* 102, no. 1 (2007): 119.

⁷³ Alan Cienki, “Metaphoric Gestures and Some of Their Relations to Verbal Metaphoric Expressions,” *Discourse and Cognition: Bridging the Gap* (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 1998), 189.

effectively communicate ideas through gesture. Gestures are metaphoric because they characterize “an abstract domain...in terms of the concrete.”⁷⁴ Shaking heads and wagging fingers accompany speeches from a parent to a child enabling the child to more quickly understand that they are indeed in trouble and have disappointed their parent. These gestures add both expressive import and a sensory experience that register more simply with the receiver’s brain. Other types of body language make communication more effective as well. In ancient Greece, great orators combined body language and speech together for communication that was remembered better by their learners.⁷⁵ Social scientists now agree a nonverbal system of communication uses images to encode and retrieve information differently than verbal communication. Body language embodies and manifests a concept in flesh. Gesture incarnates words.

The Power of Metaphor

Metaphor is a multifaceted tool helping people socially interact. Classically, metaphor has been regarded as a convention of language. This theory is taken for granted by many who essentially classify metaphor as a myth and therefore a lie. However, this understanding is false. “The generalizations governing poetic metaphorical expressions are not in language, but in thought; they are general mappings across conceptual domains.”⁷⁶ Metaphor is the way the brain conceptualizes more than it is a linguistic

⁷⁴ Ibid., 190.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Beattie, *Visible Thought: The New Psychology of Body Language* (London: Routledge, 2003), 193.

⁷⁶ George Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” in *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 203.

device. Metaphors are more than words. They are the connections between concepts. A brain filled with metaphor is a brain mapping concepts toward understanding.

The representational structure of mapping in the brain is often called metaphor-based schema. The framework created by a conceptual metaphor aids in understanding new information. “For example, a conceptual metaphor such as Crime is a disease carries with it implications about the metaphor's topic, crime.”⁷⁷ Not only does the metaphor carry the affective implications of the fear of a disease like cancer to spread all over the body, it could also imply that like a disease crime can be diagnosed, cured, or spread to others. Listeners affected by disease in their real lives will understand more about the concept of crime. An effective metaphor does not use prior associations between concepts, but instead uses metaphors to create new relations between concepts.⁷⁸

Metaphor is especially effective at adding an affective dimension to a shared discourse moment. When the speaker adopts the common metaphors of listeners they are increasing not only the understanding from the listener but the alignment between them as well. Jesus was a master of using common things (for example a mustard seed) to draw people into a story so that he could teach them a profound concept that normally required technical language.

In talk, metaphor is a shifting, dynamic phenomenon that spreads, connects, and disconnects with other thoughts and other speakers, starts and restarts, flows through talk developing, extending, changing. Metaphor in talk both shapes the ongoing talk and is shaped by it.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ David W. Allbritton, Richard J. Gerrig, and Gail McKoon, “Metaphor-Based Schemas and Text Representations: Making Connections through Conceptual Metaphors,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 21, no. 1 (1995): 612.

⁷⁸ Mary Carmac and Sam Glucksberg, “Metaphors Do Not Use Associations between Concepts, They Are Used to Create Them,” *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 13 (1984): 443.

⁷⁹ Lynne Cameron, “Metaphor and Talk,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 197.

Metaphor forms the basis of language and cognition by quelling the differences between two objects and instead stressing the similarities allowing the brain to classify knowledge in attainable categories.⁸⁰ The more we think of language itself as conventional metaphor, the more we understand how basic metaphor is for the way we think.

Jesus used metaphors to reach the deeper levels of human hearts. He knew that the “symbol, energized by a metaphor, conveys, not just an idea of the infinite but some realization of the infinite.”⁸¹ Jesus did not tell stories so people could know what God was like, but rather so they could know God. Only a metaphor could properly awaken the symbol in his stories. The challenge today is found in the symbols and metaphors of Jesus that come from a pastoral setting. Our current culture rarely finds itself in farming and ranching contexts. The goal is to find contemporary imagery that communicates the same feelings and meanings with symbols and metaphors of today. Maybe the parable of the good Samaritan should be told as the parable of the good terrorist. Maybe the parable of the lost sheep should be told as the lost smart phone. “As Kant observes, all our experience comes to us within the field of time and space.”⁸² The better we understand the experiences of our learners, the better we will be able to discover metaphors that transform their experiences.

The most amazing display of the power of metaphor is in music. Whether it is the poetic words on the page or the role of melody, harmony, volume, and speed, music

⁸⁰ Andrew Goatley, *The Language of Metaphors* (London: Routledge, 1997), 3).

⁸¹ Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphor* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 6.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 17.

carries the listener through an affective journey with metaphoric expression. Music, like all art, can “imitate nature not only in the contrived analogies of rational geometry but also in the unpredictable anomalies of irrational expression and spontaneous behavior.”⁸³ All great movies require a great soundtrack. It is hard to imagine enjoying *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, or *Guardians of the Galaxy* without the music. A good story wrapped around a metaphor and set to a great soundtrack speaks to the human heart. Good semantics begins with good semiotics.⁸⁴ The church has much to learn from the semiotics of musicians.

The Power of Parable

Parables take central metaphors and wrap them in narrative. Aesop’s preferred form of parable was a fable, a story teaching truth that features animals, and Dante was famous for his theatrical parable, but they can come in many forms. Jesus used his compressed stories to expose people to the coming kingdom of God. He also used them to expose the moral failures in the people he was sent to disciple.

Parables can make bitter pills easier to swallow, but also make difficult concepts easier to grasp, as exemplified in the moral and spiritual tales of everyone from Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad to Soren Kierkegaard and Franz Kafka. The educational and existential aspects of parables also account for their perennial popularity.⁸⁵

Teaching like Jesus will allow today’s ministers to disciple digital thinkers with image-rich stories that translate the timeless message of God for them. They are real world solutions to social problems wrapped in metaphorical thought.

⁸³ Jamie C. Kassler, ed., *Metaphor: A Musical Dimension* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), 201.

⁸⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2004), 69.

⁸⁵ James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 184.

Much like the world of video games, stories allow people to rehearse real life situations before there are consequences. They enable people to learn lessons from the mistakes of others without a guilty verdict from a court. Most of Jesus' audiences were preliterate people who thought in images and stories. Protestant churches were born in the age of words and points. The church now finds itself in a post literate world where digital imagery has replaced words. Teaching with image-rich stories is once again the best method to disciple digital thinkers. Neuroimaging displays the ability of stories to activate the brain. "Just as we understand metaphors by mentally stimulating what they describe, we understand stories by imaginatively acting them out in our minds."⁸⁶ Stories engage the brain better than points.

Jesus used parables to provoke change in people. His preferred teaching tool urged his listeners to probe and question what they knew about religion and social traditions. The parables both directed the way in which people should live but also depicted the Gospel of Jesus being played out. In a way, the life of Jesus serves as its own parable. People often did not recognize Jesus for who he was. The places Jesus visited and the people he healed always had semiotic implications in the story and history of God's people. Ministers should use the parables of Jesus as key examples and models for their own preaching.

Parables are not primarily descriptive but performative. Teaching should go deeper than the head and into the heart so that people do something. Parables do this by catching people off guard. They are not as concerned with teaching an unchanging meaning as they are with transforming your being through engagement with the story.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 182.

Preaching seeks to provide a transformative experience through parables allowing listeners to see themselves within the story.

Parables have an enduring quality to them. Jesus even withheld the meaning from some of his parables with hope that the people would discuss and debate them. This allowed his stories to spread far beyond their original audience. Preachers have long embraced the use of short stories in preaching as a key tool of communication. Parables also allow teachers to say provocative things in ways that keep you out trouble. Nursery rhymes were often born from political satire. Jesus was a master at stating things indirectly through a story. Parables are a key to discipleship because they help learners remember and apply teachings more easily.

The Power of Proverb

Proverbs served as the moral compass for poets and philosophers across cultures and throughout history. However they are not restricted to great thinkers. In our culture proverbs are learned from grandparents serving as wise sages in rural environments. A concise moralism was often just as powerful and memorable as those of the bible. Aphoristic discourse is different from the wisdom of short stories. A lack of narrative allows it to be used in any personal story. Biblical proverbs contain motifs of justice, tradition, and self-discipline leading to street smarts. They provide speech “which carries the power to make order known or threaten it, to seal human relations or undercut them, to deal in life or death, so to say (see Prov.18:21).”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ James G. Williams, *Those Who Ponder Proverbs: Aphoristic Thinking and Biblical Literature* (Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1981), 17.

Jesus was a master of language and metaphor and incorporated proverbs into his speeches for “reorientation by disorientation”.⁸⁸ While losing your life in order to save it might seem too paradoxical to be true, it is precisely in the paradox that you find the strength of the proverb. Jesus’ proverbs often bridge the gap between previous cultural experiences and the semiotics of new ideas. These ideas are rarely thick philosophical truths about the universe. Most of the time they are wise advice from an older person with street smarts. They essentially provide the listener with methods for living a better life here on earth. Proverbs differ from parables because they usually tell a general truth about life. These general truths allow teachers to communicate moral lessons and doses of wisdom to the learners. Dating as far back as 3500 B.C.E. in ancient Sumer, the Sumerians used them as instruction manuals for morality.⁸⁹

The best proverbs prove to be timeless and are now shared across cultures, divorced from their original context. Aesop’s Fables used proverbs to append and therefore reinforce the meaning of the story.⁹⁰ The story of The Lion and the Mouse ends with the proverb: “The least may help the greatest.”⁹¹ This moralism speaks differently depending on the social status of the listener. The proverb reinforces the story just as the story reinforces the proverb. Aesop’s Fables prove to work just as well in current contexts as they did in their original one.

Outdated proverbs where the meaning is known but the metaphors do not work are often called outdated clichés and do not serve communication well. People may very

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁹ Geary, 185.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 184.

⁹¹ Aesop, *Aesop’s Fables* (Fort Worth, TX: Brownlow Publishing Company, 1969), 30.

well know what “being in the loop” means, but they are not able to envision what the loop looks like or why it was ever used originally. Great proverbs dissect human motives and expose moral failure. They are able to forcibly reprove the conscience without direct condemnation. They are timeless truths that encourage people to become principled in thought, word, and deed.

The cultural context of a proverb influences the imagery it contains. The proverb itself may contain universal truth, but the setting it finds itself in is greatly influenced by the nation or people from which it was produced. Nature and nurture both influence the proverbial choice. While a proverb may seek to pass on a general truth about living well, its cultural wrapping is essential to communication.

One survey of economic texts from the United Kingdom and France, for example, found that the British used gardening proverbs more than three times as often as the French, while the French used food proverbs nearly five times as often as the British. National stereotypes, it seems, contain more than just a proverbial grain of truth.⁹²

Great orators like Jesus, Socrates, and Abraham Lincoln had a unique ability to make the complex simple. They knew that a homespun tale or saying pierced the conscience more precisely and easily than any lecture. “The plain language of parable and proverb makes these metaphorical forms so potent and so entertaining.”⁹³ It allows them to deliver profound truth in a seemingly harmless form. Interestingly enough, research suggests proverbs are far more effective at influencing men rather than women. Studies show that sharing a proverb like “live and learn” with a man after he makes a mistake comforts and

⁹² Geary, 188.

⁹³ Ibid., 192.

instructs him, however it tends to make women feel even more uncomfortable and shameful.⁹⁴

Parables and proverbs bring the multi-sensory experience digital thinkers need. They convey meaning by wrapping up spiritual truth in natural truth.⁹⁵ They are the means but not the end target. “There is not the slightest clue in either parables or proverbs as to their ultimate significance, yet we immediately understand what they mean.”⁹⁶ They may take place in the setting of a forest or a palace, but their end target is always the inner soul of the listener. The church is in the incarnational transformation business rather than the information business.

Teaching Christ through Metaphor

“Metaphor is the bridge we fling between the utterly strange and the utterly familiar, between dice and drowned men’s bones, between I and an other.”⁹⁷ It has the unique ability to help people experience new things in natural, understandable ways. Jesus knew the only way to help people know the mysterious divine was to bridge the gap using metaphors wrapped in stories. How we communicate with people is as important as what we communicate. The medium is the message.

As current educational theory now filters its information through digital, multi-sensory, narrative, and experiential methods of education, it is time for the church to return to image-rich teaching and liturgical practice. Utilizing metaphor, parable, and

⁹⁴ Daniel R. Stadler, “The Power of Proverbs: Dissonance Reduction through Common Sayings,” *Current Research in Social Psychology* 15 (2009): 72.

⁹⁵ Geary, 196.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

proverb will help communicators be effective teachers for digital learners. Research in the way the brain thinks is now verifying that the model of preaching used by Jesus is in fact effective at reaching digital thinkers. Metaphors enhance and intensify the imaginative so that we understand how to live better in reality. The goal of good preaching is not to induce better thinking in our people but rather better living. Living out a story is often more formative than the point it supposedly tries to make.

Jesus always began with his audience. He always established who they were before he prescribed his medicine to them. The audience always set the plan for Jesus. The church needs to relearn to point to Jesus rather than make points about religion. We need to embrace the art of storytelling so people find their identity in the story of the Gospels. The brain is most active during storytelling allowing the heart to have a better chance to receive its medicine.

Revealing a story has the power to reveal a listener's place in the world. The listener is able to enter into a narrative reality that highlights the very meaning of life. Stories create avenues for discipleship. One of the best strategies communicators can use to reach today's learners is to embrace the teaching style of Jesus. Jesus taught with image-rich narratives in multi-sensory environments. He engaged the brain with metaphor, parable, and proverb, and then won the heart by showing his own. His highest priority was helping his students experience a concept experientially rather than just as information.

Jesus would be the enemy of multiple choice tests. His goal for his students was not knowledge but rather personal connection. Discipleship happens when teachers craft experiences wrapped in fresh metaphors in their current context and culture. This kind of

education has the power to translate the timeless message of God for a world of digital thinkers. This kind of education has the power to bring the scriptures to life in real lives.

While doctors deal in medicine for the body, ministers specialize in incarnation that leads to transformation for the soul. Discipleship for the digital thinker requires a commitment to sacramental preaching for incarnational living. The more the world changes the more our methods need to remain the same. If we teach like Jesus through metaphor, parable, and proverb, the digital thinker will have a chance to manifest Jesus in the world.

If we want people to plug into the church, then we need to plug into the digital world. The digital world is not an alternative reality, just another aspect of reality. It is a place where relationships are nurtured, families are born, commerce is conducted, and potentially faith can be formed. “The challenge for today, and tomorrow, is to creatively imagine how to adapt evangelization and formation efforts for new contexts and conditions.”⁹⁸ If the church desires to effectively reach, evangelize, disciple, and mobilize people for mission, then it needs to equally embrace the challenge to incarnate God’s mission in the digital world. People today now have two worlds they call home, and the church needs both addresses in its directory. Perhaps the church needs to spend less time filling land with buildings and more time filling screens with social networking of Christ’s incarnated love. It is cheaper and far more effective.

We need to discover a blueprint for effective discipleship in a digital world. Discipleship may seem harder to accomplish in today’s world than in any other previous time in history. However, Jesus has not removed his requirement for his church to

⁹⁸ Julie Anne Lytle, *Faith Formation 4.0: Introducing an Ecology of Faith in a Digital Age* (New York: Morehouse, 2013), 42.

incarnate his presence. Today's churches may not use the same methods as the past, but they can embrace the same passion for faith formation.

A writer cannot talk about faith formation without talking about Jesus. Jesus was the greatest teacher who ever lived and is also the greatest subject one could ever teach. Much like Jesus, the best teachers always adapt to their culture. Today's best teachers filter their information through digital, multi-sensory, narrative, and experiential methods of education. Perhaps it is time for the church to be reborn through image-rich teaching and liturgical practice. The future of faith formation will not be effective without them.

If a teacher wants to teach like Jesus mastering the power of the metaphor is essential. Whether it is contained in a parable or a proverb, finding the right metaphor intensifies the imaginative so that people understand how to live better in reality. Creating uncommon connections between everyday images is a great way to keep the learning mind curious.

Jesus was not a fan of technical language or religious jargon. He drew his teaching from common things (mustard seeds, mountains, grass, birds, figs, dogs, and pigs) to draw people into a story so that he could teach them profound truths about life. The better teachers understand the lives of our learners, the better they will be able to discover metaphors that transform their experiences. One of the best resources for study is modern advertising. Increasingly, advertising has shifted its content from words and conversations to image, story, and music. If advertisers are not effective in reaching culture they go out of business. They adjust their communication style as a survival instinct. They are unwilling to waste even a second of time on an image that is unclear or uninteresting to their audience. "In advertising, the reader can be sure that signification is

always intentional. Nothing is left to chance.”⁹⁹ What if the church held itself to the same standard as it seeks to share its stories with people? Much like missionaries in a foreign land, the church needs to adjust its language to be clear and relevant for the culture it finds itself in today.

Jesus was a master at telling stories about eternal matters within the context of his everyday world. His storytelling “existed in the social context of Jesus’ ministry and the religious context of his mission and proclamation.”¹⁰⁰ Jesus even told parables differently depending on the context of his listeners. Great preachers today should follow his example. Talk about the home brewer who used the wrong yeast and created skunky beer. Perhaps instead of throwing pearls to pigs it would be wiser to tell stories about giving a smart phone to a great grandparent, car keys to a baby, or a Picasso to a blind person. These are all good things that would be unappreciated, misunderstood, and probably “trampled” by their receivers. They are also effective ways of retelling Jesus’ story with modern metaphors.

Teaching Christ through Semiotics

Stories create avenues for discipleship. They are “one of the foundations of complex human society without which there could be no division of labour, little social co-operation and only a subsistence standard of living.”¹⁰¹ The goal of good preaching is not to induce better thinking in people but rather better living. A properly researched and

⁹⁹ David Crow, *Visible Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics in the Visual Arts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 84.

¹⁰⁰ John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 25.

¹⁰¹ Jules Lubbock, *Storytelling in Christian Art from Giotto to Donatello* (London: Yale University Press, 2006), 1.

written sermon does no good if its method does not speak the language of its intended users. Research in the way the brain thinks is now verifying that the model of preaching used by Jesus is in fact effective at reaching digital thinkers. Jesus always began with his audience and helped them enter into a narrative reality that could highlight the very meaning of life.

One of the best strategies communicators can use to reach today's learners is to embrace the teaching style of Jesus. Jesus taught with image-rich narratives in multi-sensory environments. He engaged the brain with metaphor, parable, and proverb, and then won the heart by showing his own. His highest priority was helping his students experience a concept experientially rather than just as information. If we want to unlock the power of Jesus' preaching then the key is semiotic preaching. Semiotic preaching allows the listeners to experience the message for themselves and to form "a kind of communion" with the preacher.¹⁰²

"A semiotic sermon reads the signs of what God is up to in the world, connects those signs in people's lives with the Jesus story, and then communicates the gospel by connecting people in relationship to Jesus through stories, images, and gestures."¹⁰³

When modern churches look more like shopping malls than cathedrals there is a loss of story. The cathedral was the story of the bible for the illiterate community as it was filled with tapestries, stained glass, and carvings that showed the stories of the bible before the pastor ever said a word.¹⁰⁴ Churches provided a multi-sensory experience of watching

¹⁰² Eugene Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 170.

¹⁰³ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 22.

¹⁰⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Pacific Advance*, March 11, 2017.

grandly robed pastors physically acting out the breaking of bread, smelling and seeing smoky incense filling the space, and kneeling and tasting the elements of the Lord's Supper. Today's churches may not use the same methods as the cathedral, but they need to embrace its passion for multi-sensory worship experience.

Semiotic preaching makes sure gospel seed is planted in the soils of the particular culture. Universal truths are found in particular contexts. While it is important to preach in the language of the culture, we do not preach the message of the culture. The message of Christ is grown in indigenous soil but it must remain the message of Christ. It is important to ponder what the message of Christ will look like in the digital world. "That means Christ will flower and flourish in people who instantly 'access' information 24/7, think and dream in pictures, hunger for experience and relationships, and yearn to connect on emotional and spiritual levels with a present and accessible God."¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the next generation of preachers will tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan through the lens of Minecraft.

Semiotic preaching may begin in the pastor's study but it can only be reborn with the people. What starts in a study must be finished in the culture of the people.

But as with any organic thing, there comes a time to set your creativity free to fly, to let your sermon live in and among the world, to allow God's Spirit to give it breath, to allow it to metamorphosis from something you have offered to something Christ may embody and empower.¹⁰⁶

Every culture has its own set of symbols and signs. Sharing the story of God in the images of the culture allows them to experience the heart of Jesus firsthand, with no translation needed.

¹⁰⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 242.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 327.

Teaching Christ to Digital Thinkers

The church may feel out of place in the digital world, but is that any different than how it felt in other times in history? The church has always adapted to foreign cultures. Just as missionaries learn the language of the cultures they are seeking to reach, the goal today is to learn how to communicate effectively so digital thinkers become vibrant disciples of Jesus Christ. The digital world has changed the way the culture thinks and works. It is no longer an alternative reality; it is now another valid and critical aspect of reality. The digital world is the real world. It is a place where relationships are nurtured, families are born, commerce is conducted, and potentially faith can be formed. This new aspect of reality has changed the way the brain is wired and the way it thinks. The ability to work and think with digital technology has created workers significantly more efficient and skilled at solving complex problems. It has also created a new challenge to educate them (whether secularly or religiously) more effectively. Contextualization is paramount for the church today.

Educators teach digital thinkers by engaging them visually and tangibly. The more they let them taste, see, touch, smell and experience their subject matter, the more students are able to engage, remember, and implement the teachings. The greatest preacher in the history of America, Jonathan Edwards, filled his sermons with powerful engagement for his audience. “His sermons abound with images and analogies to give light to the understanding and heat to the affections.”¹⁰⁷ Edwards was a fantastic teacher in his time because he believed what he said and he could make the audience “feel the fires of hell” through his imagery. He did not want the people to merely listen to his

¹⁰⁷ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 92.

experience, but rather to experience it for themselves. “Rhetorical interaction is moving the audience’s attention from ‘What’s the speaker saying?’ to ‘How does what the speaker’s saying apply to me?’”¹⁰⁸ Edwards knew the hearts of his listeners, what they struggled with and what they needed, and employed the skill of a surgeon to care for the soul. Through powerful preachers like him, God was more than once able to initiate “great awakening in the church.”¹⁰⁹

Discipleship awakens when followers of Jesus fill the wounds in their lives with his grace and then live out that grace for the world. In a diverse, multi-cultural world, teachers are no longer omniscient sages. There is far too much information to be processed and far too many perspectives to be considered in the digital world. The most effective teachers adapt their role from dispenser of information to guiding mentor as students explore information on their own. These teachers practice learning as a collective endeavor between themselves and their students. Effective teachers today are more “babe in the manger” than professor behind a lectern. “The heart of the Incarnation is about God going out of His way to speak human, not forcing us to behave but living among us in weakness and poverty so that we know He’s on our side.”¹¹⁰ Teachers today need to speak the human language of today.

We may not have the Christ story told in the stained glass of our modern cathedrals, but we have an unlimited power to paint that story online. Pinterest is today’s stained glass and Facebook is today’s local pub. Much like the title song to Cheers,

¹⁰⁸ Sarah Lloyd-Hughes, *How to be Brilliant at Public Speaking: Any Audience, Any Situation* (New York: Prentice Hall Life, 2011), 133.

¹⁰⁹ Piper, 98.

¹¹⁰ David McDonald, *Down to Earth: Why We’re Here and Why It Matters* (Littleton, CO: Samizdat Creative, 2009), 92.

people like to go “where everybody knows your name”, your story, your prayers, your hopes, and your fears. Social media is the place where people’s stories are told, thus it needs to be the manger where Christ’s story disciples the digital generation. It is time for the next great awakening!

Faith Formation in the Digital World

Churches will never end their pursuit for the Holy Grail receptacle that can deliver discipleship. One of the great church planters of the 20th century, Doug Murren, believes that although the boomer generation was successful at planting churches to reach unchurched people, its methods of assimilation and discipleship after attracting them failed.¹¹¹ Churches modeled society and marketed trendy worship styles, modern buildings, and magnanimous leaders. Church planting ministries like Willow Creek Association successfully taught leaders how to attract people however they left them with no appreciable difference in their lives or faith.¹¹² “The challenge for a community of faith is to reinforce communal relationships that nourish and cultivate faith in a manner that is sensitive to other commitments.”¹¹³ If people are not intimately connected within a community of faith then their role is merely as a consumer instead of as a participant or owner of the ministry. Ministry became a product to be marketed to the masses instead of faith formation to transform lives.

A second key shift from the boomer generation was the role of the pastor. Pastoral education is geared toward theological formation, yet the new marketplace of churches

¹¹¹ Doug Murren, *Pacific Advance*, March 11, 2017.

¹¹² Leonard Sweet, *Pacific Advance*, March 11, 2017.

¹¹³ Lytle, 37.

demanded business leadership. “Leadership became the identity not the role.”¹¹⁴ Pastors began to see their role as building a business with mission statements rather than as the incarnation of Christ’s mission here on earth. For Christians wanting to participate in healing the world around them, rather than building bigger buildings for a particular ministry, they had no choice but to look “elsewhere for Christian community, edification, instruction, and fellowship.”¹¹⁵ Although there are professional and business aspects to congregational life (insurance, mortgage payments, salaries, etc.), the focus of pastors should be to help Christians incarnate the love of Christ for the healing of the world. “We are here to incarnate the Incarnation, to continue the work Christ himself began, in anticipation of God’s ultimate intervention and the rescue of Creation.”¹¹⁶

The most critical area for churches to address is the need for social networking for the future of the church. Effective social networking improves both assimilation and discipleship in congregations. Jesus always began with his audience and was able to draw a crowd. The digital world has created the most powerful means of social networking in the history of the world. Churches that fail to utilize social media will not be in the lives of their people. Consequently, churches that fail to utilize social media to reach the crowd will also find themselves empty. “In the hands of Googlers, technology has bent to the purposes of core human longings: knowing, being known, belonging, perception.”¹¹⁷ Social media provides free, instant, networked, and multi-faceted access for discipleship

¹¹⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Pacific Advance*, March 11, 2017.

¹¹⁵ McDonald, 84.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2012), 6.

and evangelism. That access is being utilized across industries by groups wanting to influence the future of society. “The digital revolution in communications continues to have a profound effect on education and the way it is delivered in both the church and the academy.”¹¹⁸ If the church desires to effectively reach, evangelize, disciple, and mobilize people for mission, then its current challenge is to incarnate God’s mission in the world of social media.

It is impossible to overstate the change in relationships created by social media. Leonard Sweet is a champion of defining the difference between the Gutenberg and Googler worlds. In the Gutenberg world information was found in libraries and textbooks, and connections were made in living rooms and classrooms. In the world today, face-to-face conversation is only a minor part of social interaction. Social media has many different uses but it is primarily the platform for building relationships. “Googlers are not as interested in proving a point as they are in making connections. Trust me, 800 million-plus human beings from around the world do not log on to Facebook so they can get into an argument. They do it to be connected to other people.”¹¹⁹ This is the place you go to share pictures of your grandchildren, socialize after work, and ask for prayers for your spouse. No other form of communication has allowed people to share information with all their “friends” with the speed and immediacy of a click of a button. “Community has found a new place to live” and the church better occupy a room there.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ James Flynn. “Digital Discipleship: Christian Education in a Digital World.” *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 1 (2013): 88.

¹¹⁹ Sweet, *Viral*, 14.

¹²⁰ Scott Ness and George Fox University, *The Faith Web: A Networking of the Body of Christ to Mitigate Relationship Voids and Strengthen the Faith Community*, 2014, 30.

A decentralized platform may not be familiar or comfortable for religious leaders, but there is no other option. It is simply the way the culture interacts today.

Fortunately, digital media and social networking are a gift that can enable faith communities to be creative in how they structure and restructure models of evangelization and formation. Providing options for how, when, and where activities occur can remove barriers that prohibit a community's story-keeping, story-sharing, and story-making efforts.¹²¹

Discipleship cannot happen without relationship. Social media provides the network where religious leaders can invite the outsider, engage the faithful, and encourage both to interact with each other. A check-in on Facebook can serve as the new form of a pastoral home visit. Protestants embraced the technology of Gutenberg because it allowed them access for discipleship in the homes of their people. They understood that the church was losing its place as the center of a town and the culture around them. They decided to create resources allowing the gospel to manifest in the homes of its people. The priesthood of all believers was truly given to all believers. It is time to embrace the power of digital technology to do the same today.

Our people today live in two worlds. The transition from a pre-digital world to a digital world has been a frustrating one for the church. Our pews are a mixture of people speaking different cultural languages (words vs. images). The percentage of people fully plugged in to digital media increases exponentially with each generation.

The 2010 comparison of social networking use by generation shows 16 percent of the GI Generation (74+), 34 percent of the Silent Generation (65-73), 43 percent of the older Boomers (55-64), 50 percent of younger Boomers (45-55), 62 percent of the Gen Xers (34-45), and 83 percent of Millennials (18-33). The full impact of digital media and social networking will be realized when Gen X and the

¹²¹ Lytle, 150.

Millennials, along with those who follow them, represent the majority of the population. We need to plan for the present, with the future in mind.¹²²

Those numbers have only increased since 2010. As the world changes so do the demographics in the pews. Older generations have quickly discovered that if they want to be in the lives of their children and grandchildren they better log-in. The church needs to learn the same lesson.

Because social media is a platform built on interactivity and participation, it is important for religious leaders to shift their role from teacher to facilitator and resource manager. The digital teacher may set the table but they do not prepare all the food. Social media is a round table with no head. The teacher and student are both learners and contributors. The teacher loses a certain amount of control, but they gain 24/7 access which leads to closer relationships. The key for the church is to trust that closer relationships lead to spiritual growth. Jesus promised that if two or more gathered around his mission he would be present with them as well.¹²³ Imagine the discipleship that could happen if hundreds and thousands were gathering all the time across continents (no passport required). Do we doubt that the Holy Spirit could use those interactions as well?

There is risk in losing control over content and explanation of theological material in social networking. Social networking displays both good ideas and bad ideas. The need to prayerfully consider how the Holy Spirit might guide this social interaction is important. Pastors are trained to pray before they prepare a sermon, not just for their lips to say the right things, but so the listener's ears hear the right things. "In other words, there is no preaching without the discipline of prayer. A preacher must know first how to

¹²² Lytle, 156.

¹²³ Matthew 18:20.

‘be with’ the Lord before s/he tries to proclaim the Lord.”¹²⁴ A thoughtful email requires time in “knee-mail” with God’s Spirit. A decentralized, participatory experience like social networking requires more prayer, more trust in God’s Spirit working within the interactions, and semiotic preparation of cultural metaphors and stories that frame the gospel of Jesus Christ relevantly.

Faith formation in the digital world has the potential to connect people’s stories to the one great story of God’s love for the world.

To be human is to have a story. Unlike white sharks, black widow spiders, red fox, blue whales, gray parrots, brown snakes, and every other colored creature, human beings construct narratives, whether they write them down or not. And all humans edit narratives with the pen of complex, sense-making minds. Our story telling brains make each one of us a unique matryoshka doll of stories within stories that explain why we are the way we are.¹²⁵

Jesus was the master of stories. He cared about people and he cared about the stories of their lives, but he did not leave them there. He connected their story to the ancient story of God’s people. And by connecting their story to the ancient story of God’s people, he allowed himself to enter both stories and to tell a better ending.¹²⁶ By placing people in God’s story, and therefore the redeeming love of Jesus within their own, Jesus creates a new social network of belonging with eternal consequences.

Discipleship for the digital thinker requires a commitment to sacramental preaching for incarnational living. The more the world changes the more our methods need to reflect the creativity of Jesus. If we teach like Jesus through semiotics and build a digital platform for faith formation with social networking, the digital thinker will have a

¹²⁴ Raquel St. Clair, “Prayerful Exegesis,” *African American Pulpit* 5 (Summer 2002): 1.

¹²⁵ Sweet, *Viral*, 98.

¹²⁶ A great example is Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:1-42.

chance to manifest Jesus in the world. Whether it is in the pews, at the local pub, sitting at a well with a foreigner, or creating new social connections online, everyone has a story that needs a better ending. The digital world offers the church a place where relationships are nurtured, families will thrive, and commerce is conducted instantly and cheaply. May this place also be the social connection where faith can potentially be formed, grown, and energized for Christ's mission to heal and save the world.

The Digital Catechism

The Digital Catechism is a website that translates Luther's *Small Catechism* into the language of an image-based culture. The goal is to cross both language and cultural barriers by replacing traditional workbook curriculum with content that can be processed in existing social media platforms. By extending the traditional classroom into a 24/7 interactive format online the teacher should expect greater participation and contact with their students. Teachers will have the opportunity to invite students to blog, answer questions, pin, post, and interact with each other outside the confines of a traditional classroom.

The Digital Catechism promises more than online doctrinal content. It hopes to promote a greater sense of belonging and community within the class of students. This is especially useful in churches where students do not all come from the same neighborhoods and the same schools. It also encourages community between individuals and the minister. This is a more expansive conception of church where faith can grow in a networked world. Ministers who participate in the virtual lives of their people are able to better incarnate the care of compassion the gospel of Jesus Christ requires.

Rather than standing at the church door looking out, we need to be present in the places people work, live, and play, to enter into the sanctity of everyday life and

understand the ways people make meaning there. We cannot define our culture, our community, or individuals from the literal or figurative perspective of the institutional church. We must put ourselves in the places where life happens, and recognize all of life as being “in the cathedral.”¹²⁷

The Digital Catechism also offers students participatory control over content that interests them. In other digital platforms they can share music, videos, and images related to the doctrinal content that enhances the lesson. Platforms of participation allow students to do more than just absorb information. They allow them to shape and share their Christian identity as “the priesthood of all believers”. For digital thinkers, Pinterest and Instagram can become the new stained glass where the church tells its story. Twitter and Facebook can become the billboards where they invite others to taste and see that the Lord is good.

It is precisely in areas of participation where education must expand for the church and digital platforms provide a ripe environment to see them grow.

Jim Kast-Keat, associate minister for education at Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan, says, “Education must grow and change as we grow and change.” Kast-Keat, a digital and mobile native, told me that programs shouldn’t be places to passively receive information, but training grounds for how we engage with the world in faithful ways.¹²⁸

By cultivating a more expansive sense of activity in the local church there will also be a broader sense of belonging and connection. It decentralizes the pulpit and gives a voice to students to be digital story tellers of God’s work in the world and in their lives. We have given them the power to nurture the faith of others in their preferred social media platform. The digital world allows the church to enter into other aspects of life in an age when people are often not willing to enter a church.

¹²⁷ Keith Anderson, *The Digital Cathedral* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), 26.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

Much of the change the church does will undoubtedly be temporary and provisional. The Digital Catechism is merely an attempt to bridge a gap between catechetical tradition and the new digital thinkers in the world. The calling is to be faithful to scripture and tradition, while at the same time to speak the gospel in the language of the culture. The more the world changes the more the church needs to reflect the creativity and passion of Jesus to reach the world.

This is a precarious and dangerous project, repairing and rebuilding the very boat which keeps us afloat. But of course it is even more dangerous simply to sit complacently in that boat as it sinks, or to oppose or otherwise obstruct those seeking to rebuild it. If it has gotten into waters which it cannot manage, something must be done.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Gordon Kaufman, *In the Face of Mystery* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 52.

SECTION 4: TRACK 02 ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The Digital Catechism is a web-based tool that translates Luther's *Small Catechism* into the language of an image-based culture. It replaces fill-in-the-blank workbooks with a digital tool for Lutheran catechesis. The Digital Catechism crosses both language and cultural barriers normally found in oral and print media, and it has the ability to more effectively create and collaborate across geographical borders. As language has adapted dynamically from its start as oral, then printed, and now digital, so must catechesis adapt to this new age of digital communication and education.

The key to The Digital Catechism is its use of image-rich metaphors to clarify the content of the catechism. It also encourages 24/7 interaction in a digital classroom where instructors and students can use its content to blog, answer questions, pin, post, and interact with each other in their preferred social media platform. It does not seek to replace already existing social media platforms but to utilize their strengths to allow the content of Luther's *Small Catechism* to be interactive in private forums guided by a minister. In these forums teachers can encourage students to connect its content with other digital media. Currently, The Digital Catechism provides a Pinterest board that students can "rePin" to their own boards, however in the future it needs to be expanded to function more seamlessly on other social media platforms.

The Digital Catechism also provides a solution for churches that minister to a large geographic area. Busy families often find it difficult to travel for weeknight classes more than once a week. Even when teachers cannot get the students to the classroom they can bring the classroom to the students. The Digital Catechism provides the opportunity to network with students online when physical meetings are not possible. It provides

digital lessons, downloadable worksheets that students can work on individually, and a Pinterest board that serves as a model for students.

SECTION 5: TRACK 02 ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

This section of the written statement provides the specification for the website: thedigitalcatechism.com. It contains the bulk of the details of the research, development, and focus of the website artifact.

Goals: The purpose of thedigitalcatechism.com is to provide a digital catechism for Lutheran churches so that they can engage confirmation students in their preferred online social media platforms. When the image-rich content is utilized by a teacher it should increase regular interaction with their students, enhance connections with each other, and deepen faith in the individuals. This web-based tool replaces traditional curriculum and encourages an online classroom environment. The site will also help ministers more confidently teach like Jesus by modeling image-rich teachings that embrace story telling thereby leading to better sermon and bible class preparation.

Audience: While I never intended to limit the audience of the site, I recognized that my true target audience was primarily ministers in local Lutheran congregations and the students they serve (especially since my content is limited to Luther's *Small Catechism*). The initial test cases are my current confirmation students at my congregation and then other ministers of other congregations within my sphere of influence. This will allow me to test the usability of the site in early 2018 before promoting outside my sphere of influence.

Scope and Content: One of the benefits of social media is that it provides already used platforms where ministers interact with their students. I know they will find possibilities of use that I have not yet imagined. I do have plans to add additional doctrinal content to the site, but will wait to see what user-generated feedback offers as the most fruitful.

Budget: Developing a website is normally not something I would have considered, but I did get to spend a couple of hours with a web developer who helped me negotiate the possibilities. His expertise has helped me avoid contracting out the technical aspects of development and for now the ongoing maintenance of the site. At this point my total personal expenditure for web address, hosting, and software is around \$500. Building in monetization with ads is a possibility if the site is expanded and if contracted a future developer is deemed necessary.

Post-graduation Considerations: Promoting thedigitalcatechism.com will be a future endeavor. Using existing contacts with Lutheran ministers in my field of influence is the most practical way to initially promote the site. I will also seek

out speaking opportunities at Lutheran conferences where I can share insights on catechesis to digital thinkers and to share my site as a possible tool.

Standards of Publication: Websites do not have a fixed standard of rules and evolve as technology changes. The artifact should have valid HTML, CSS and JavaScript, and it should meet accessibility and semantic guidelines. Character encoding and proper server settings are also required. The artifact will try to include all of these standards so that it is available on as many platforms as possible.

SECTION 6: POSTSCRIPT

The dissertation and artifact began to take shape in July 2017. During the process I constantly wrestled with the concept of pouring new wine into old wine skins. I knew that confirmation was a tradition that the Lutheran Church would stubbornly hold on to (perhaps in its current form) and yet I still desired to offer new strategies for discipleship. Once I was convinced during the dissertation writing phase that the best strategy for teaching people who have grown up with a rewired digital brain was to teach with image-rich narratives, the artifact became clear. Because I desired for the artifact to help Lutheran congregations I knew the content had to mirror Luther's *Small Catechism* if traditional churches were to use it.

Writing lessons in an image-rich format was not a difficult part of the process, however choosing the digital platform for the material proved to be more challenging. Along the way I considered a plug-and-play DVD curriculum that ministers could use as a "lesson starter" for their own teaching. I also considered building an online course management system whereby ministers could attach lessons, grades, and tests for their students. While each of these options showed potential for monetization, they also required significant initial investment and did not meet all my goals.

In the late fall I consulted with five experts who offered advice on ways to take my catechetical content and utilize it in a digital format. The four advisors included:

- (1) Scott Ness of The Faith Web, a networking website to enhance faith community
- (2) Keith Anderson of The Digital Cathedral, doing networked ministry in a wireless world
- (3) Tom Burnett, an expert web developer
- (4) Jason Glaspey, my dissertation artifact expert advisor and the founder and CEO of Factory, a digital publishing company

(5) Rich Melheim, founder of Faith Inkubators, a Lutheran confirmation curriculum publisher

While many different options showed potential promise, I determined from the varied advice to produce a website whereby ministers could take my image-rich catechetical content and utilize it on their preferred, existing social media platform. This direction confirmed the advice of my dissertation advisor, David McDonald, who has consistently encouraged me to use existing platforms for interaction. Additionally, this advice allows me to meet the second of my goals which is to increase regular interaction between teachers and their students and to enhance their connections with each other. There is no better way to do that digitally than through existing social media platforms where students are already navigating. At this time, the website only provides interaction with Pinterest, however I hope to expand its use to other platforms eventually.

In writing both the dissertation and the artifact, I am grateful for my dissertation advisor, David McDonald, who encouraged me along the way to form my essays as potential parts of the final dissertation. This allowed my research and reading to be prudent and relevant to each of the other parts. David also encouraged me to explore experts in public education, including conferences, where aspects of education in a digital world already had fruitful results. The church would be wise to learn more from the innovative attempts by modern educators to reach students

Finally, it is my hope to expand upon the artifact for eventual monetization. Financial gain is not so much the goal as is gaining the means to explore my passions. Dr. Leonard Sweet always reminded our cohort, “A picture is worth a thousand words”, and I now believe “my areas of passion are worth more than a thousand other jobs.” The content of Luther’s *Small Catechism* is only the tip of the iceberg of Christian teaching

that is needed for digital thinkers today. It is my hope to offer the church more of the whole host of biblical teaching that people need in the language they understand.

APPENDIX 1: ARTIFACT MANUSCRIPT – THE DIGITAL CATECHISM

www.thedigitalcatechism.com

The home page was designed to clearly communicate the purpose and goals of the website content, to offer a welcome to new users, and to provide users a place to provide feedback or ask questions. The about us section was designed to introduce the author and to provide legal disclaimers for the website. The catechism section was designed as a link to Concordia Publishing House’s existing PDF version of Martin Luther’s traditional catechism. The final tabs are designed as 12 separate image-based lessons on the chief parts of Luther’s catechism. Each of these lessons contains a downloadable PDF worksheet for student use, and a link to The Digital Catechism Pinterest Board. Below is an example page from the website:



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