

## Chapter 6: Scripture and the Church as Filtering Communities

*For 170 years we have been obsessed with machinery that would give access, and give it fast, to a Niagara of information. Obviously, the Internet does that and we must give all due praise for its efficiency. But it does not help us, neither does television or any other 19th or 20th century medium (perhaps except the telephone), to solve the problem of what is significant information.*

Neil Postman<sup>1</sup>

*With the reader as publisher, the reading public disappears.*

Marshall McLuhan<sup>2</sup>

Possibly the most significant area we'll explore for digital culture and scripture is the realm of social media, and media ecology gives almost no published academic work and only some raw tools to work with. Today, the trend is universally understood under key brands like Facebook and Linked-In, though five years ago these would have been meaningless to most, and in five years from today they may sound quaint, if not forgotten. To label the cultural phenomenon a "trend" however is to unintentionally insinuate that this element of digital culture itself is passing. It isn't.

If this thesis weren't necessarily incarnated into an old media print format, our opening paragraph would have been replaced by the 4 minute 22 second long YouTube video entitled "Social Media Revolution."<sup>3</sup> The oft-updated video answers the question, "Is Social Media a Fad?" with some of the following digital-culture-segmented blurbs:

- 0:01 → 00:04 **Is Social Media a Fad?**
- 00:05 → 00:09 Or is it the biggest shift since the industrial revolution?

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<sup>1</sup> Postman, "The Humanism of Media Ecology," 167. italics mine.

<sup>2</sup> McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, 145.

<sup>3</sup> "Social Media Revolution, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIFYPQjYhv8>." posted 20 July 2009 by Socialnomics09 at youtube.com (keywords: "social media revolution")

- 00:09 → 00:12 Welcome to the Revolution
- 00:14 → 00:17 By 2010 gen Y will outnumber baby boomers
- 00:17 → 00:20 96% of them have joined a social network
- 00:20 → 00:23 Social media has overtaken porn as the #1 activity on the web
- 00:23 → 00:26 1 out of 8 couples married in the U.S. last year met via social media
- 00:27 → 00:29 **Years to reach 50 million users:**
- 00:29 → 00:32 Radio: 38 years
- 00:32 → 00:34 TV: 13 years
- 00:34 → 00:35 Internet: 4 years
- 00:35 → 00:37 iPod: 3 years
- 00:39 → 00:42 Facebook added 100 million users in less than 9 months
- 00:46 → 00:48 If Facebook were a country
- 00:48 → 00:51 it would be the world's 4th largest
- 00:51 → 00:55 yet, China's QZone is larger with over 300 million using their services

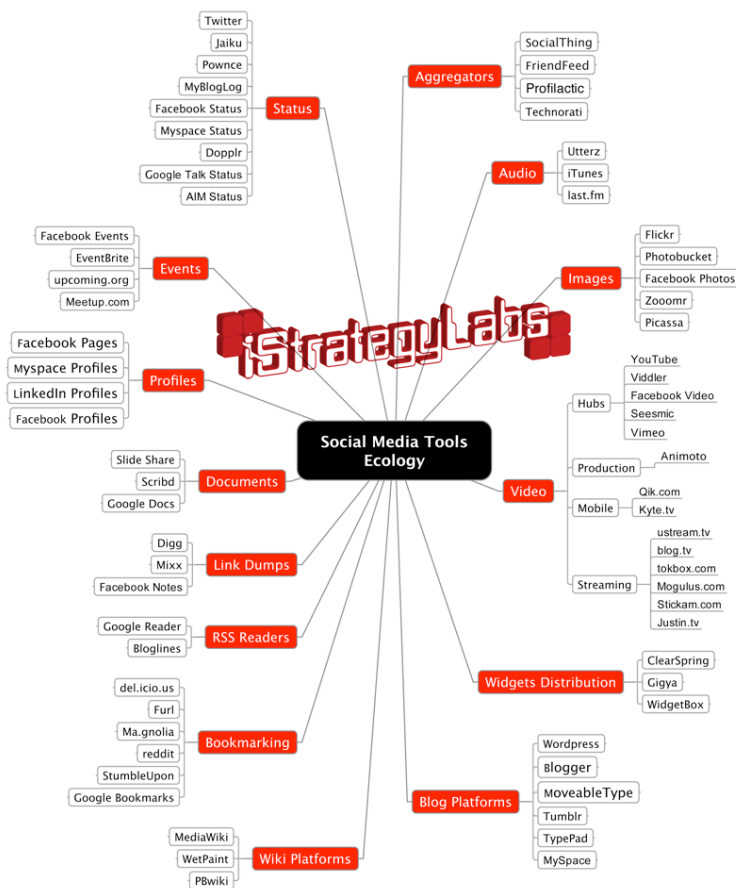
The video (the current version, posted for eight weeks, has ½ million views), goes on to review multiple categories of the social web including Twitter and Wikipedia (it doesn't even cover MySpace, though at 200 million users, is already declining in importance). iStrategyLabs, a marketing company specializing in social media this year tags social media sites into fourteen categories, including Status (Twitter, Facebook Status, Dopplr), Profiles (Facebook, Linked In and MySpace lead), Link Dumps (Digg, Mixx), Blog Platforms (Wordpress, Blogger), and Aggregators (Technorati, FriendFeed).<sup>4</sup> Lest older generations still be tempted to see these sites as niche or “for the youth” because of unfamiliarity, we refer to both the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times online—both publications systematically link to many of the services listed above.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Social Media Tools Ecology,” *iStrategy Labs*, n.d., <http://www.istrategylabs.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/social-media-tools-ecology-by-istrategylabs.gif>.

<sup>5</sup> “The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia,” n.d., <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

**FIGURE 3: CURRENT SOCIAL MEDIA ECOLOGY**



Popular culture references must suffice in order to show the enormity of the environment because academic work, in its deliberative style, has not yet caught up with the movement. New works on Christian use of new media, for instance the 347-page volume *Understanding Evangelical Media*, touches video games and graphic novels with more gusto than the Internet, which is still termed “Cyberspace” and is largely ignorant of Facebook.<sup>6</sup> A similar work relegates the chapter on social media to a youth ministry concern.<sup>7</sup> Even digital flagship *Wired Magazine*, though often covering social media, just finally in August 2009 published its first article predicting the likely insuperable challenge from Facebook towards the most-cited leader of Internet space: Google.<sup>8</sup> In sum, the cultural-ecological impact of media like Facebook

<sup>6</sup> Quentin J. Schultze and Robert H. Woods, eds., *Understanding Evangelical Media: The Changing Face of Christian Communication* (IVP Academic, 2008).. Page 144 provides a few sentences, but views Facebook as a place to post personal information, missing its information ecology and cultural potency.

<sup>7</sup> John Mark Reynolds, ed., *The New Media Frontier: Blogging, Vlogging, and Podcasting for Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Fred Vogelstein, “Great Wall of Facebook: The Social Network’s Plan to Dominate the Internet,” *Wired Magazine*, June 22, 2009, [http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/magazine/17-07/ff\\_facebookwall?currentPage=all](http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/magazine/17-07/ff_facebookwall?currentPage=all).

remains overlooked. And while it's fair to suggest this particular brand may not survive in near years forward (though it has signs of staying power), we'll take a brief look at Facebook<sup>9</sup> and another popular site—Digg<sup>10</sup>—as paradigmatic of social media, before suggesting the mapping to a doctrine of scripture in one key traditional area: the relationship between scripture and the church.

### *Describing the Social Media Environment*

#### **Facebook**

Founded in February 2004 by Harvard drop-out Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook currently (mid 2009) claims 250 million profile holders worldwide, with 120 million logging in to the service at least once daily. By some measures it is the largest site on the Internet.<sup>11</sup> Sixty-five million users access the site via their mobile device in addition to a traditional computer interface, contributing to the very real sense of ubiquitous cultural presence.

Key parts of Facebook include:

- **Profile.** Allows users to virtually represent themselves with a set of personal data, including: photo, e-mail/address/mobile phone, education and employment information, lists of interests in books/music/media. “Real name” usage is required—Facebook will ban accounts that employ pseudonyms.
- **Friends and Groups.** The key feature of Facebook that links profiles to each other, each link representing real-world relationships. Links are only established when both parties agree. Although controls allow for varying levels of privacy, linked accounts (“friends”) can generally view all the personal data of their friend—data that is mostly hidden from others. This feature effectively creates small communities within a sea of millions.
- **Wall / News Feed.** This central stream of information is composed of short updates, current photos, and current website links from friends, arranged with

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<sup>9</sup> [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

<sup>10</sup> [www.digg.com](http://www.digg.com)

<sup>11</sup> “Facebook Statistics,” *Facebook*, n.d., <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>.

newest information at the top, and updating in real time, sliding down the page as the information grows older.

Zuckerberg often describes Facebook’s activity as “mapping” the “social graph”—a digital model for relationships that already exist in real-world interaction. Users can mark how they know somebody in rather extensive detail—not simply from “work” or “school” or “family” (although certainly these), but also “on a winter 2001 trip to Cancun” or “through a friend.” Because real names are required, Facebook’s model makes obsolete critical charges of disembodied or superficial “virtual” relationships as the first attribute of online activity (activity we might easily categorize as “toy”-level adoption, versus this maturing environment-like adoption). Further maturation of the technical and social environment will be marked by increasingly accurate models of unmediated relational networks.<sup>12</sup> Digital natives understand this intuitively—they find it uncomfortable for a stranger to attempt to “friend” them on Facebook, just as they would if the same stranger walked up to them on the street and began speaking in familiar terms.<sup>13</sup>

## Digg

Launched in October 2004 (just months after Facebook) Digg was one of a number of key sites often mentioned in the context of “Web 2.0”—a press-moniker for websites that emphasized interactivity and information sharing instead of static content. At first glance, Digg looks like the results of a search engine such as Google. But entries on the home page—each link pointing to items like photos, news stories, or blog content—appear because, in the sea of

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<sup>12</sup> Though after a certain crux point, I’d think the relationship would be asymptotic—increased modeling detail will result in smaller and smaller improvements in relevance.

<sup>13</sup> Vernacular speech has already adopted “friend” as a verb (to friend / to un-friend = to add or remove a connection between profiles) as well as Facebook (to Facebook = to send a message or initiate a connection via Facebook); Lance Strate, “About Face(book),” *Lance Strate’s Blog Time Passing*, March 1, 2009, <http://lancestrate.blogspot.com/2009/03/about-facebook.html>. Media ecologist Lance Strate notes the attitude regarding online strangers among his college students. However he may misread the significance of Facebook overall, mistakenly identifying MySpace as a similar network.

available of available information, multiple persons have selected this item as a favorite: a submission or selection called a “Digg.”

Newly “Digged” items immediately appear in subject-sorted “Upcoming Stories” lists that give users a chance to view them and respond with a simple “thumbs down” or “thumbs up.” Each “Digg” corresponds roughly to a vote for the item, and contributes to its relative visibility to other items on the site. Using a custom algorithm that takes into account the “number and diversity of Diggings, buries, the time the story was submitted and the topic,” the website chooses to further promote or demote the story.<sup>14</sup> Stories over 300 Diggings are typically designated as “popular,” and are more even more likely to rise to the top of the pack—popular stories boast tens of thousands of Digg votes.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Filtering Community—Putting it Together**

Even the screen on which I type this thesis is too slow to keep up with social media technology, and since writing summaries of Facebook and Digg above, what was just theory has moved towards reality. Digg has recently made the move to bind the two sites together using a technology extension (API) dubbed Facebook Connect, which acts as digital signature service, allowing a user’s Facebook identity (profile) to record and authenticate their actions.<sup>16</sup> “Let the reader understand!”—this move facilitates the following previously composed statements:

If we were to combine the features of Digg and Facebook, we create a crucial digital-social concept we might term the *filtering community*. Filtering communities are relationally defined subsets of people who choose, through interactive process, what information is relevant

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<sup>14</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” *Digg*, n.d., <http://digg.com/faq>.

<sup>15</sup> One story reporting the death of pop star Michael Jackson has 24, 613 Diggings. “Michael Jackson Dies,” *TMZ via Digg*, n.d., <http://digg.com/d3usQ8>.

<sup>16</sup> “Application Programming Interface”—a set of standard building blocks and communication codes that allow computer programmers to integrate two separate programs. For instance, a calendar program on a Macintosh might use the Google Calendar API to synchronize the events scheduled on the local computer with the online version of Google Calendar.; Jen Burton, “Attention Ladies and Gentlemen: shouts have left the building,” *Digg the Blog*, n.d., <http://blog.digg.com/?p=766>.; “Facebook Connect - making the world more social,” *Facebook Developers*, n.d., <http://developers.facebook.com/connect.php>.

and what information is not. In the Digg site, slices of content are voted up or down in a non-linear, interactive fashion, “rising” or “falling” as its users find them relevant. The missing component of Digg is that its user base is limited only to those anonymous users who chose to attend to the site and are attracted to a certain subject—a toy-like approach to the Web that lives separate from “real life.” But Facebook’s social graph provides an essential layer to Digg’s philosophy of group information management, allowing us to know with transparency and limiting relationally *who* influences our ability to see or not see what is next.

A filtering community becomes the trusted social matrix—family members, a group at work, the whole community of friends linked to one particular person—that chooses what, in the sea of information, will become visible to other people in the community. These small networks become navigational radar in an otherwise overwhelming sky of information. Of course, this has already become apparent to business interests, who have laid out “Ten Social Media Commandments” in the interest of increased profits:

The level of success of any social media campaign is directly proportional to your ability to gain the trust of your target audience. ... Our research shows that search engines like Google are paying attention to the level of “community,” “friendship,” and “voting” that occurs within accounts that list your Web site link. This means that in order to rank high, you have to truly engage your audience in a mutual conversation...<sup>17</sup>

In short, Neil Postman’s quote at the beginning of this chapter is short-sighted. What is *significant* in a culture of information overload is what is *made visible* by the trusted community embodied into social media.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Heflin, “The Ten Social Media Commandments by Social Networking Information for Business,” *Business Social Networking*, n.d., <http://www.corpsocialnetworking.com/bsn-blog/the-ten-social-media-commandments/>.

## *Media Ecology Insights Applied to Social Media*

We've already mentioned that media ecology has struggled to keep up with advent of social media, and there is scarce current evaluation of the environments typified by Facebook and Digg. But two older theories can be applied here and bear attention.

### **Tertiary Orality or Secondary Literacy (Ong)**

Recall Walter Ong's theories of orality and literacy, and his cultural approach to history that turns on major technological changes in human communication. Orality transitions to craft literacy at the invention of the alphabet, craft literacy yields to print literacy at the printing press, (print literacy as a precursor to mass literacy), and the electronic age introduces a "secondary orality" which features audio-oral speech that is based on print, such as TV news anchors or recorded audio books.<sup>18</sup>

The advent of social media has caused a dilemma in Ong's classification system, for the text-based short messages common to Facebook, instant messaging, and SMS messages are at once silent and text-based and individual—like print—but also oral in pace and structure and intent.<sup>19</sup> This speech is belongs neither in "literacy" nor "orality," and "secondary orality," which is aural in nature, cannot incorporate it. A new category is needed, and there are several terminology proposals for this "digital orality." The most common is "tertiary orality," which accents the oral characteristics of the mediated communication, but Ong himself in 1996 is quoted in an interview as preferring "secondary literacy" for e-mail communication that carries much greater immediacy than formal print. But e-mail is distinct from social media especially in its composition (the oral psychodynamics more similar to print) and John P Walter suggests

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<sup>18</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 133.. It's probably important to note that some New Testament scholarship has taken up the phrase "secondary orality" in another way—when speaking of the origins scholarship and textual transmission regarding the Synoptic problem. This is not our usage here—although Mark Goodacre, in a recent critique of James Dunn, adopts a wider understanding of oral cultures that conceptually fits well (although applied elsewhere). Mark Goodacre, "Orality and Literacy IV: Secondary Orality in Christian Origins Scholarship," *NT Blog*, n.d., <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2008/05/orality-and-literacy-iv-secondary.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ong explains multiple characteristics of primary oral speech which we'll address in just a moment.



additional options including “secondary visualism” or “secondary oral residue”—the latter perhaps retaining the most continuity with Ong’s taxonomy.<sup>20</sup>

As the academic conversation is unsettled, we’ll choose “tertiary orality” to accent the characteristics that we most want to note in the social media ecology. These characteristics of primarily orality appear in modified form in the conversation found in contexts like the Facebook Wall. The first few are directly from Ong’s notes on oral culture in *Orality and Literacy*:

- **Additive rather than subordinative.** This oral characteristic does not feel the compulsion to relegate language in hierarchical categories, but is comfortable with multiple concepts laid side by side in conversation, each in view but theologically multi-faceted.
- **Agonistically toned.** Primary oral cultures required an interlocutor in order to build ideas and tension and didactic experiences (e.g. Plato’s dialogues). Tertiary orality, though able to reference texts and comment on texts, often prefers to build to crescendo an additive idea, “comments” piling on an original thought with increased ingenuity, and genuine interaction that includes disagreement.
- **Situational rather than abstract.** While print enabled the carrying of ideas from one context to another, providing an aura of disconnection from the context from which it arose, tertiary orality’s contexts are multiple and particular. Instead of projecting an illusion of impartiality, electronic dialogue is welded to each person as contributor, discussed in the context of a group or family, and can easily be linked to an event or GPS coordinate.
- **Partially conservative.** This is to say that oral culture tends to honor wisdom, age and knowledge, while print culture honors youth and novelty. While other factors continue to favor an accelerated pop (not folk) culture, tertiary orality better lends itself to creative newness only by commenting or rearranging previous content—recall Digg as entirely composed of previous content—rather than creating something from scratch.
- **Affinity with textual fixity.** Though the patterns of tertiary orality are oral, the building blocks are fixed letters and words (though spelling returns to a pre-print unfixed condition), and therefore share a common cultural identity to fixed or remediated print texts.

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<sup>20</sup> JP Walter, “Tertiary Orality, Secondary Literacy, and Residual Orality,” *Machina Memorialis*, n.d., <http://www.jpwalter.com/machina/?p=325>.

- **Intersubjectivity.** This characteristic is what Ong argues is missing from the media model that sees communication as one-way.<sup>21</sup> But Ong thinks of media as TV and radio, and misses the advent of precisely what he requires. Tertiary orality is not simply interactive but intersubjective, requiring the other in one's mind as one types.

We'll keep these characteristics in mind as we think about scripture in a social media environment. But first we should also consult Marshall McLuhan.

### **Gatekeeping (McLuhan and Levinson)**

“When the instant speed of information movement begins... There is a collapse of delegated authority and a dissolution of the pyramid and management structures made familiar by the organizational chart” - McLuhan<sup>22</sup>

In the world of print media and original new media (radio and television), barriers to content creation were many. Economic realities restricted technology use to the rich. Technological and physical realities limited the length or amount of content, whether column length or hard 30-minute timeslot. To surmount the costs, would-be writers required publishers or producers—and consequently their approval—to distribute their information. Publishers, as information gatekeepers, could make decisions in regard to pure ideology or, in the subsequent world of advertising-funded media, by revenue model—privileging whatever brought more readers/viewers.

Authoritative gatekeeping was hardly new. Paul Levinson credits Martin Luther's emphasis on people reading the Bible for themselves in an environment of the new printing press as the dethroning of the original gatekeeper—the Roman Church.<sup>23</sup> The media realities of the hand-copied manuscripts (most often by religious orders) in conjunction with magisterium-orbiting theology, conspired for a millennium of information control. The model after moveable

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<sup>21</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 331.

<sup>23</sup> Levinson, *Digital McLuhan*, 121.

type, however, was extended, not abolished. Nation-states (for example, the Soviet Politburo) or the journalistic media themselves constricted flow enough for Marshall McLuhan to note in 1979 that “the Xerox makes everyone a publisher.”<sup>24</sup> The egalitarian shift was unavoidable.

Levinson views McLuhan’s comments as best understood as metaphor for the digital age (photocopying never actually replaced book publishing), when digitally formatted documents can be posted from anywhere, with little barrier to entry. Though Levinson is clearly picturing Web publishing (his digital adaptation of McLuhan is 2001), the principle is accurate but potentially amplified in the context of social media, where individuals become communities, and communities not only become the source, but *become the context* of both new and (importantly for our discussion) *republished* content (a function of interactivity that Levinson could not have anticipated).

It is at this point that categories of the doctrine of scripture become apparent. In a digital-social environment, we can map republished content to remediated scripture, additive content to midrash, and the contextual, filtering community to the *ekklesia*.

### ***Mapping Social Media to a Doctrine of Scripture***

The crisis of the Protestant Reformation theologies of scripture was, of course, the relationship between the Text and the Tradition—scripture and the church. Definitions written since have had to make judgments on the issue—and as we noted earlier, the question of which had historical priority informed the theological question of “which came first.” Because of digital culture’s bias toward the present-tense, we won’t make attempts to speak to who called forth whom, but instead describe the living relationship between the people of God and the Word of God in the social media environment.

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<sup>24</sup> McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, 178., quoted in Levinson, *Digital McLuhan*, 120.; Note as well the illusion of news media freedom is constricted by editing bias or the economy of space.

## **The Church in Social Space**

The suggestion here is plain. In the way that social media slowly grows to model “real” social relationships (Facebook’s “social graph”), it also begins to model and embody the Church herself in a mediated space. Theologically it’s important to state here that the church is more than simply the social relations of its participants, leaving it as no more than a club, but rather those called and formed by the initiative of God as his real presence in the world: the body of Christ. Though social media may only be aware of these socio-political, visible relationships (for instance, Facebook does not have a “sister in Christ” checkbox to model spiritual reality), the interconnectedness that is embodied can be carried into social space because the means that create real relationship—namely communication—exist in this space as well.<sup>25</sup>

Practically (and theologically) speaking, this is best understood from the standpoint of the local body of believers. As each real connection between members of a local body is modeled on Facebook, a community is formed that has enhanced ability to interact and “do life together.”<sup>26</sup> A group is formed that automatically intermingles information and daily (or hourly) news from each church member, and allows for interaction on that news. It’s as if the church, instead of being able to gather once or twice or week, remains gathered and engaged—a corner of the global village that reverses the isolating trends of American culture past the industrial revolution, and retrieves the neighborhood parish.<sup>27</sup>

## **The Church as Filtering Community**

Once incarnated into social space, the church has the unique ability to influence its own content and discussion in the flood of information. The group selects and “floats” or “buries”

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<sup>25</sup> “Visible”—I don’t intend here to speak to the idea of “visible or invisible church” and the merits of each argument in ecclesiology.

<sup>26</sup> A common phrase relating to church life in my home church community—a concept embodying intentional Christian community as characterized by: friendship, relatively frequent personal contact, service and sacrifice, sharing of personal possessions, table fellowship, standing-by in trials, caring for each-other’s children, interpersonal confession of sin, etc.

<sup>27</sup> Using the language of McLuhan’s Laws of Media tetrad, visually-linguistically demonstrates how new human artifacts (technologies) simultaneously enhances, reverses into, retrieves, and obsolesces.

certain topics, approaches, and media content. The process is in dialectic with identity. Because the church maintains a theologically rooted identity, its shared narrative helps define what ideas “make the cut” and gain relevance or visibility, and ideas that gain visibility reinforce the identity of the church. The process is discontinuous with those parts of the historic church that have emphasized gatekeepers such as the magisterium or Protestant preaching pastor, but instead is relegated to a complex sum of the individuals in the community. It is in greater continuity with the egalitarian priesthood of all believers of 1 Peter 2 or Rev 5.10, and traditions that have emphasized this, whether Anabaptist traditions such as egalitarian Quaker meetings, or conventicle (small groups) in the history of Swedish or German pietistic traditions.

In what ways does the filtering community interact with scripture? There are several:

### ***As Recontextualized***

We’ve already spoken a bit about remediated scripture—the digital appropriation of the words of scripture we previously have been familiar with in print. Here we highlight some key characteristics of this in the social media environment. Because new media do not destroy or replace previous media but transform and expand it, the text of scripture itself is not destroyed but contained in new forms that live in new contexts. The print-literate characteristic of scripture is remediated to the context of tertiary orality—which retains its connection to the fixedness of printed scripture when quoted, but is recontextualized into the social media conversation. Because tertiary orality and print literacy share typography, quoted scripture naturally fits into the environment—say the silent, active context of the Facebook Wall. But because it appears in the flow of conversation, bracketed by other republished text fragments and status updates, it gathers new semantic meaning.

For instance, if Sarah updates her Facebook status to say, “My grandmother died this morning,” John might comment in the same flow by quoting the first several verses of Psalm 23:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

2 *He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;*  
3 *he restores my soul.* (NRSV)

Two others might mark this verse with a “like,”<sup>28</sup> causing it to be placed with greater visibility on others pages, and Erika responds with a comment phrased that says, “Comfort, O Comfort my people” referring to the text of Isaiah 40.1. Finally, Amy adds, “Me too” to the conversation. The recontextualization is clear: instead of taking the text on the terms of its historical setting or canonical placement, the text is in the meaning flow of the conversation, which includes a text that has been considered related and appropriated by another member of the church. The context of scripture becomes the life—the conversation—of the church! And the insight is reversible. As the church represents herself into the tertiary orality of the environment, she is remediated to the surface text, establishing her words in the same medium as scripture.

### ***When discerning and decision making***

One of the crucial tasks of the church in relationship to scripture is to discern how scripture is to apply to the life and the culture of the church. This assumes the authority of the text in the community of the church, and Luke Timothy Johnson explains this authority in three ways: it authors the identity of the church, provides a source of authoritative statements (authorities) on the life of the church, and authorizes a freedom to interpret by providing exemplars on methods of discernment.<sup>29</sup> It’s this last issue that is particularly in view in his *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*, and he sees the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 as crucial fodder.<sup>30</sup> The account that Luke gives, writes Johnson, is a process, though

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<sup>28</sup> As in “I like this,” a mark that counts subjectively as a “vote” of affirmation; similar to “Digg.”

<sup>29</sup> Though for Johnson authoritative statements have the possibility to be fundamentally discordant. He resists attempts in some difficult cases to require a unified coherence in the ethical voice of scripture. For particularly evangelicals, this is controversial.

<sup>30</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Abingdon Press, 1996).

a bit too orderly as laid out in Luke-Acts—there was probably more controversy (as evidenced by Galatians 2) than made the official record.<sup>31</sup>

How does this process, with scripture as its base and conversation as its lifeblood, look in the realm of social media? The concept of a filtering community itself is one of discernment—the group makes filtering decisions that modify the group’s own experience of the information age. But remediation creates a new a unique and seminal cultural situation that allows for continuity with the discerning practices of the early church, yet amplifies new ways.

Bolter and Grushin in *Remediation* argue that two equal and opposite tensions exist in every remediation process, both now and before digital media.<sup>32</sup> Immediacy is the transparent presentation of the real—the first-person view that seeks to generate a sense of “actually being there,” seeking to have the medium itself disappear. But hypermediation is the precisely the self-awareness and enjoyment of the medium’s self-conscious presence—a multi-threaded, multiplying, interconnected swirl of activity that repetitively forces the user to the surface.

Applying this tension to social media gives us insight into the unique potential of a discerning, socially mediated church. Both immediacy and hypermediacy are felt in the environment. Immediacy exists in immerse qualities of the personal network. Our conversation with another feels as if we are sitting in-person, with coffee between us. The unique powers of social media can even transfer ourselves in another’s point of view—altering our own and seeking to understand. Hypermediacy seems more apparent—the constant stream of information from our community forces our consciousness to constantly readjust to a changing environment.

But the unique experience of social media allows the convergence of these tensions, giving us *a first-person, immediate view of the group’s collective conversation*. For the first time, Paul, standing in front of the Jerusalem council, can see through all the eyes at once.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>32</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 1st ed. (The MIT Press, 2000), 11.. Evidence of remediation can appear as early as a 17<sup>th</sup> century painting.

Digitally mediated to a collective view of the discerning church, he (or anyone else) can say with some authority, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”

### *As midrashic commentators*

Our final probe is to compare the digital filtering community of the church to the idea of Jewish Rabbinic Midrash. This is not to make any kind of direct analogy, but to generally explore a mode of a community interacting with Scripture that seems carry some uncanny resemblance to the natural functionings of social media culture.

The vital related digital component is the “Comment”—the ability by those in the filtering community to publically interact with a posted slice of scripture. Clearly tied to an personal identity, interactions can be expressions of approval or disapproval, questions, notes, sharing, or posting new, re-published, or re-mixed content that reflects the original content.<sup>33</sup> Creating a comment extends the “thread” and pushes it to the “top,” giving it greater visibility and increasing the likeliness that it will gain further comment. Further, each type of comment intensifies the radical recontextualization of the Scripture to its thread.

Midrash itself is “comment”-ary on Scripture. Jacob Neusner defines midrash as “interpretation, amplification, exegesis of a holy, revealed text: the written Torah;” or simply “the way Judaism interprets scripture.”<sup>34</sup> Generically, “midrash” can apply to any similar commentary or process of interpreting the text (or a compiled collection of such interpretations), but Rabbinic Midrash (midrash capitalized) references the canonical collections of the first six centuries. Our comparison here does not need to make any claims to canonical status, but there are several points of interest to be made between digital comments and Jewish commentary.

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<sup>33</sup> To “share” is to publically extending the audience of the current thread by making an introductory comment that links to others in the community or in related communities who may not have seen it otherwise.

<sup>34</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), vii.



First, both Midrash and digital commentary blur the distinction between text and commentary.<sup>35</sup> Students of Torah, when quoting Torah also cite the Midrashim on the Torah, which provides amplification and application of the text. Under centuries of ancient and medieval comment, the text stands as a diachronic stack of accumulated wisdom. This is not unlike a commentary thread in a filtering community, which has a starting point, but must be referenced with comments included.<sup>36</sup> While a distinction can be made between the original message/text and the comment/commentary, the conversation requires that they be left undivided.

Second, midrash mediates Scripture. Neusener writes, “Rabbinic Midrash... *mediates* Scripture to those who by faith meet God in the whole Torah of Sinai, oral and written.”<sup>37</sup> His sense is not distant from the media-ecological sense of the term “mediate”—to extend the natural functioning of. Both commentary and comments become mediated extensions of the scripture.

Third, midrash lives in the present. Midrash, while assuming the historicity of Scripture, does not seek history but rather enduring present truth. “For the Rabbinic sages, the past took place in the acutely present tense of today, and the present also found its locus in the presence of the ages.” Digital culture too has a primary orientation to the present. It does not obliterate historical thinking, but reorients it to the present social media community—the time is ‘now.’ “For the synagogue,” writes Neusner, “the Torah speaks in the present, not the past tense.”<sup>38</sup>

Fourthly, midrash is multivalent. Neusener shows by example how Rabbi Yohanan in the Ruth Rabbah provides commentary on a verse where Boaz offers Ruth some bread and wine. The commentary reads the verse from five widely distributed ‘historical’ first-person viewpoints:

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<sup>35</sup> Neusner writes, “The sages through Midrash exegesis read from the entire written Torah forward to the oral one.” *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>36</sup> A fading but perhaps more familiar version of this is an e-mail thread with replies from multiple authors copied into the body of the text, or Google’s Gmail’s auto-sorting of messages into conversation threads. The record of conversation is helpful for the newest author to comment appropriately. Replying to a message mid-thread, that is, adding a new comment that ignores newer related messages, but instead replies to an older message, is generally a digital *faux pas*.

<sup>37</sup> Neusner, *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture*, vii. Italics mine.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

King David, King Solomon, King Hezekiah, Manasseh, and the Messiah. It's as if the Rabbi lives in a digital world, naturally suggesting multiple, simultaneous re-appropriations of the past to the present that pre-figure the future. Digital commenters (not commentators) inherently use their particular viewpoint and each lays side-by-side with no hierarchy, but also showing coherence, which leads us to:

Fifth, midrash is pattern recognition. Yohanan's appropriation of each character above follows a pattern he finds in each being given a throne, passing through hardship, and returning to their throne. Pattern recognition—Neusner also uses the term “layout”—is key as well to digital culture, which assigns coherence and relevance to similar patterns in comments. This process is natural to a socially mediated, digital generation who, floating in a sea of information learns to recognize patterns as maps through the data.

Overall, Neusner describes midrash as a “mode of writing *with* scripture” that is in “constant dialogue with scripture,”<sup>39</sup> a characterization that could apply equally to his world of expertise or the world of remediated scripture in the context of the church as commenting community.<sup>40</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Our explorations here have sought to describe the church as embodied in a social media environment, and its potential relationship to remediated scripture. The culture carries important characteristics. Tertiary orality (Ong) recalls the immediate tone of oral culture translated to the work of fixed typography—allowing for non-linear conversation which

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>40</sup> After writing this section, I found a similar comparison by biblical scholar Eep Talstra. While he is not aware of social media, his connections between the “Librarian and Scholar” functions of communicating texts leads him to give an example in Midrash Leviticus Rabba on Dt 4.28. The theological commentary by the midrashic interpreters illustrate the “needs and freedoms of the ancient reading community” which Talstra suggests as a hermeneutical process in “new media” environments. See Epp Talstra, “On Scrolls and Screens: Bible Reading Between History and Industry,” in *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*, ed. Charles Ess, Research Center for Scripture and Media of the American Bible Society (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 301.

accumulates knowledge as the process of conversation partners. The technological elimination of gatekeeping (McLuhan/Levinson) gives equal access to the entire community. The process of social media allows groups like the visible, local church model a process of information relevance and discernment, where visibility (“floating to the top”) helps define the identity of the community.

Scripture in digital textual form now for the first time, shares the common vocabulary and space with live, human interaction, and as it appears in the conversation is radically re-contextualized, not in historical or canonical terms, but in the context of the church herself—her communication. Discernment and decision-making with scripture as its guide works naturally in a social media environment that allows unique access to the viewpoints of other (immediacy) and of the group itself (hypermediacy). And finally, digital comments carry an uncanny resemblance to Jewish midrash as “mode of writing with scripture” in the present tense from multiple perspectives in a blending of text and context.