

# How Wide and How Long, How High and How Deep: The Role of Media Ecology in Church History

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The leading figures in media ecology—Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Neil Postman, Harold Innis, and Elizabeth Eisenstein—have all commented on the influence of various media environments upon the unfolding of church history. Their observations on the topic, however, have not to date been specifically collected and set into perspective with a view toward understanding more recent developments in that history. In this article, I undertake a preliminary overview of the subject, leading to two conclusions: First, the role of media ecology in church history is more varied, pervasive, and influential than previously thought. Secondly, therefore, by teaching media ecology as a unifying discipline either at the church or seminary level, one could actually deconflict that history, potentially leading to greater unity between church communities.

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Whatever the original and limited context of its use might have been, a medium has the power to fly far beyond that context into new and unexpected ones. Because of the way it directs us to organize our minds and integrate our experience of the world, it imposes itself on our consciousness and social institutions in myriad forms. It sometimes has the power to become implicated in our concepts of piety or goodness or beauty. And it is always implicated in the ways we define and regulate our ideas of truth. (Postman, 1987, p. 18).

At the 2008 convention at Santa Clara University, one prominent member of the MEA asked why so many members were religious. “Guilt,” a participant responded. (As one of these religionists, I found the response amusing. I wanted to say, “OK, I admit it—we religionists attend academic conferences out of guilt. So I’m wondering—*why are the rest of you here?*”) The real question being asked, of course, was not, “Why do so many MEA members practice religion?” but rather “Why do so many religious people study media ecology?”

It is an intelligent question, since many leading figures in media ecology have either belonged to religious orders or been notably devout: A partial list includes Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Elul, John Culkin, and Ivan Illych. As all of these men were Christians, let us ask the more specific question: Is there something about media ecology that would attract or fascinate a Christian?

The answer is this: The history of Christianity follows the history of media and is driven by it. Therefore, media ecology is the best read of church history. Church history, conversely, is an ideal discipline in which to apply the insights of media ecology: Where media ecology truly excels is at longitudinal study—the effects of media over time, and the longer, the better. Not weeks and months, but decades. Centuries, even.

The story of the Christian church, of course, spans millennia. Few other human enterprises have so long a history—and thus are so well suited to media-ecological study.

The central insight of media ecology, of course, is that the physical characteristics of the medium of communication will over time become the cultural, intellectual (and, I argue, spiritual) features of the culture that uses it. The stripped-down view of media ecology and church history is this: The three stages of media—pre-print, print, and electronic—correspond to three stages of church history: Pre-Reformation, Reformation, and, well, something more recent. This is already an improvement over most accounts given in seminary or Sunday school. There, usually, the role of print is listed, briefly and externally, concerning the Reformation (Ong, 1967, p. 264). It's not otherwise mentioned.

This results in “church history as military history”: Church history told as a sacred series of conflicts and campaigns, complete with heroes and villains, turning upon the virtuous actions of Great Men. This does not encourage a deep or mature understanding of events in their contexts. Instead, it fosters disunity, partisanship, and the rehearsing and perpetuating of those conflicts, and serves to villainize those whose tradition was on the opposing side. Naturally, each tradition tells its own version, and the stories don't necessarily mesh or match. Media ecology, as a unifying approach, offers a healthier and deeper alternative: It is implicated, in various ways, at nearly every major turn in that history. What follows in this paper is by no means a comprehensive treatment, but an overview of the many points where media ecology intersects with the history of the Christian faith. (A disclaimer before we continue: I discuss here only the churches that I know from the inside. They are divergent enough to illustrate my point.)

If McLuhan, Ong, and Postman are right, then church history needs rewriting. If they are right, then the biggest changes in the history of the church were motivated not by differences in doctrine or practice, but by media effects. We've been arguing for fully 2,000 years over *media effects*.

This raises the possibility that by educating the church (or its leaders) in media ecology, we could actually get us all on the same page (admittedly a very large and colorful page). McLuhan observed, “What is indicated for our time, then, is not a succession of media and educational procedures like a series of boxing champions, but coexistence based on awareness of the inherent powers and messages of each of these unique configurations” (McLuhan, 2003, p. 4). Substitute “churches” for “media,” in the understanding that one derives from the other, and it becomes clear that one could actually learn to approach and practice the faith as an integrated whole. Ideally, therefore, media ecology should be taught at every seminary (and every Sunday school as well) as a unifying discipline: Knowing how shifts in media have shaped church history can help us retire the “military history” model.

The concept of media ecology appears in the Bible well before Jesus' day. Neil Postman writes

In studying the Bible as a young man, I found intimations of the idea that forms of media favor particular kinds of content and therefore are capable of taking command of a culture. I refer specifically to the Decalogue, The Second Commandment of which prohibits the Israelites from making concrete images of anything. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water beneath the earth.” I wondered then, as so many others have, as to why the God of these people would have included instructions on how they were to symbolize, or not symbolize, their experience. It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system *unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture*. We may hazard a guess that a people who are being asked to embrace an abstract, universal deity would be rendered unfit to do so by the habit of drawing pictures or making statues or depicting their ideas in any concrete, iconographic forms. The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking. Iconography thus became blasphemy so that a new kind of God could enter a culture. (Postman, 1987, p. 9, italics in original)

There is no mention of writing in the book of Genesis. The first person in the Bible we see writing is Moses, whom God commands “Write this in a book, and recite it to Joshua...” (Ex. 17:14). Robert Logan (2004) observes that Moses was raised in the household of Pharaoh, and so would have learned the Egyptian hieroglyphic system of writing. He did not encounter the phonetic alphabet, however, until his sojourn among the Midianites (pp. 36-37). It is from them that Moses learned this new system of writing. After hieroglyphics, the alphabet surely seemed to him near-miraculously easier. And Moses uses the new technology of alphabetic writing to introduce two other innovations: Monotheism and written ethical law (p. 96). The codifying of the 613 commandments of the Torah would have been quite impossible without the *aleph-bet*.

Moses, however, demonstrates that he has not fully internalized the worldview of the new technology: In Exodus 18, we see a picture of Moses’ learning curve as he is initiated late in life into the alphabetic worldview. He had set about to judge all of the disputes of the law which the people brought before him, in the manner of a tribal chieftain. Perhaps he had seen Pharaoh do the same; and Moses sat from morning until evening hearing the cases and teaching the application of Torah to each case. His father-in-law Jethro immediately saw the problem inherent in this approach; Moses apparently did not.

Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?”

Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.”

Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task

is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace." So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. (Ex. 18:14-24)

The advice which Jethro gave to Moses was certainly good; the matter seemed obvious to Jethro—and probably so to us. But it was far from obvious to Moses. Jethro was able to see what Moses could not because Jethro had already internalized the worldview of the phonetic alphabet. He grew up with it. This meant not only that he could read and write, but that the concept of dividing things—be they words or crowds of people—into abstract units, infinitely repeatable, extensible, and scalable, was one he learned with the alphabet as a child. Moses, by contrast, came to knowledge of the alphabet late in life. Though certainly an intelligent man, Moses could not see the problem (nor the solution) that to Jethro was self-evident.

It is just as evident to us, then, that the role of media ecology in Biblical history far predates Christianity. Let us now note the unique features of the media landscape that existed in the 1st century CE: The letters of Paul were the earliest Christian writings circulated. Their success owes in part to the new media of parchment and codex. Gamble (1995, p. 55) argues that these new media were likely chosen because they were more affordable, while Innis (1951/1999) observes that these were far more portable and readable media than papyrus scrolls (p. 14). But the success of the Christian message owes also to the conquests of Alexander the Great, who invented Koine ("common," simplified) Greek for the command and control of his multinational army and empire (pp. 10-11). Thus there existed a transnational language for the transmission of this new message. The Christian scriptures were written in this common language, which gave them a much wider potential audience.

The resulting shift in Israel from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek had other consequences as well: Dated approximately 200 BCE, the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek shifts both the direction of reading and the nature of understanding. From the research for his book *The Alphabet and the Brain: The Lateralization of Writing*, Derrick De Kerckhove (1995) discovered that without exception, all pictographic writing systems, past and present, are written vertically. All writing systems that represent sound, however, are written horizontally (p. 27). Furthermore, alphabets without vowels are read right to left, whereas alphabets with vowels (with the exception of Etruscan) read left to right (p. 28). The act of reading from right to left is a different cognitive process entirely from that of reading left to

right: The latter is a left-brained process, emphasizing time-ordered sequential processing abilities, whereas the former is a right-brained process, emphasizing shape- and pattern-recognition (pp. 28-30).

Thus reading Hebrew emphasizes big-picture thinking, but the Hebrew alphabet is not easily transplantable or transportable: Reading it requires contextual clues as to what the vowels should be. Greek, on the other hand, entails a cognitive process that requires no such clues, and is therefore much more cross-culturally *trans*-portable—no cultural/contextual cues are needed—but which inevitably atomizes reality into homogenous, continuous, “visual” space (De Kerckhove, 1995, pp. 34-35). Hebrew and Aramaic, read right to left, preserve “acoustic” space and the sense of the sacred which it entails.

Hence we may understand St. Paul’s missionary task, in part, as that of translating the Hebrew worldview into Greek, and doing so in such a manner that it survived the translation. The present controversy regarding Paul’s supposed “invention” of Christianity stems from the nature of this task, and this prior cognitive shift: Paul had to make explicit (or figure) in Greek the elements of mystical cosmology which were implicit (or ground) in Hebrew, and to do this for a non-Hebrew audience. (Few writers, if any, have ever addressed this.) It also follows that if the internalizing of the left-to-right phonetic alphabet had such momentous consequences in the Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, (Ong, 1982, p. 24), then a comparable cognitive shift was later at work in the regions previously colonized by Alexander, Aristotle’s best-known student. It was into this media environment that Paul preached his message.

Following Constantine’s Edict of Toleration in 313 CE, two things happened: The Empire came into the church—and the holy went out into the desert (those most able to instruct the new converts literally “deserted”). Thus began the monastic movement and a two-tiered approach to the Christian faith. The lower tier, for the laity (who are also the illiterate), consisted of the seven sacraments, which mark the seasons in the believer’s life, and what instruction they could gain from sermons and later from didactic artwork and statuary. As Umberto Eco observed, this was like the Apple computer: Extremely user-friendly, icon-driven, requiring no great literacy at all. The upper tier was monastic: It entailed vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, a lifetime commitment. What one gained thereby was literacy, education, and a lifetime of spiritual guidance. This was seen as the way to intimacy with God. It was not for everybody: It was the narrow way, the entrance to the contemplative life. So from the fourth century on these two tiers diverged: The literate practice of the faith differed increasingly from the illiterate practice.

This divide persists today, and causes a strange loop paradox, fueled by literacy: Great numbers of ex-Catholics fill the pews of Evangelical and Charismatic churches. They have found those expressions of the faith richer and more directly engaging than the lower-tier Catholicism that they learned in their parishes. At the same time, there are several generations of highly literate converts to Catholicism: From John Henry Newman and G. K. Chesterton, Marshall McLuhan, Avery Dulles, and Thomas Merton, to Walker Percy, Tom Howard, and Peter Kreeft. What both of these groups

found was something closer to the upper-tier practice of the faith. Yet in not recognizing the dynamics in play, these two groups have regarded each other with incomprehension and distrust.

Clouding the issue further, parish priests almost always come from among the laity, and train to minister to the laity. As such, they are often unaware of the differences between the faith, which they practice, and the faith-practices of the religious orders. In so many words, they become lifelong teachers and exhorters of a lesser practice and in the past have been suspicious of their parishioners who claimed to have discovered a “higher” way.

McLuhan, Ong, and others speak of the difference between acoustic space and visual space. On the surface, these terms are counterintuitive: What makes acoustic space acoustic is not the mere presence of sounds. Otherwise the whole world, with such rare exceptions as empty recording studios, sensory deprivation tanks, and Trappist monastic cells, would be acoustic space. It is not. Likewise, visual space is not distinguished by murals and sculpture—else the Sistine Chapel would be visual space *par excellence*. In fact, it is—or was—acoustic space *par excellence*. The difference bears explaining.

In acoustic space, the eye functions as the ear does: in the center of things, in a 360-degree, simultaneous all-at-onceness approximating the nature of sound. Sound is dynamic (344m/sec @ 40 C), non-linear, non-repeatable, and unable to be frozen or fixed: It is, as Ong tells us, the most ephemeral of the senses. We only experience sound as it has occurred and is passing away. But sound connotes presence: We hear things that are present and active, not things which are absent or inert. Gordon (1997) explains acoustic space this way: “Look behind you without turning around. You are now in acoustic space” (p. 31). It is in such space that God is encountered, if He is to be encountered at all: Sacred space is acoustic space. McLuhan cites Mircea Eliade in explaining that literate man has essentially desacralized his world (McLuhan, 1962, pp. 69-71). While Eliade does not say how this came about, McLuhan argues that this was caused by the technologies of writing and printing. McLuhan explains that while pre-print people lived in “acoustic space,” a world dominated by sound such that even the eye functions as an ear, Typographic Man lives in “visual space,” where even the ear functions as an eye. To experience the logic of this, one need only visit an Orthodox or Roman Catholic house of worship: The interior is decorated in such a manner as to suggest visually the all-at-once-ness and simultaneity more common to hearing than to sight. In the 360-degree media environment of pre-print worship space, the eye approximates the experience of the ear. Compare this to the worship space of Evangelical churches, and it is clear that all visual distraction from the reading of Scripture has been removed. Indeed, the centerpiece of such worship is the preaching of the Word, where the sermon approximates verbally the linear, paragraphic, sequential exposition of reading text—thus the ear functions as an eye.

The real downside of typographic, visual-space worship is Absence. Ong (1967) is explicit: Hearing connotes Presence (p. 114). The connotation is this: “He is speaking, therefore He is here.” Conversely, reading connotes absence: “He is absent,

therefore He has written.” So no “magic” can happen—we should be satisfied simply reading about what once took place. (Acoustic space is where we meet God: This explains the renewed interest in the spiritual disciplines practiced by the monastic communities. These practices serve to foster and cultivate acoustic-space awareness.)

Harold Innis said that the printing press broke the Catholic Church’s monopoly upon salvation: Anyone who wished to could now read the Scriptures in his own language. While certainly true, this is an inadequate summary of the effect of typography upon the Reformation. Ong explains:

The religious complexities of this age have been subject to endless analyses, but seldom if ever to analysis directly attending to the state of the communications media. Some attention is commonly called to the connection between the development of printing and the spread of literacy and of Bible reading, which mark the beginnings of Protestantism. For the most part, however, historians have assessed the effect of printing in quite external fashion: printing “spread ideas,” made the text of the Bible “available,” put the Bible “into the hands of the people,” or “encouraged more people to read.” All this is true enough. But the interior change in psychological structures tied in with the shift of the word from a written to a printed culture is at least as important as the physical spread of inscribed texts, for changes in sociological structures are the interior coefficients of developments in exterior history. (1967, p. 264)

Martin Luther praised the printing press, calling it “God’s highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward” (Postman, 1987, p. 32). John Wesley wrote, “It cannot be that the people should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading” (Watson, 1984, p. 154). In view of the many other ways that other generations of believers might have ended Wesley’s sentence (prayer, the sacraments, charitable acts, the infilling of the Holy Spirit, etc.), clearly Wesley shows the bias of his time and background. Luther of course well knew that both the Crucifixion and Pentecost outweigh the printing press in “driving forward the business of the Gospel.” While both Luther and Wesley were speaking hyperbole, such quotes as these demonstrate the “interior change in psychological structures” Ong discusses.

From Erasmus in the 16th century to Elizabeth Eisenstein in the 20th, almost every scholar who has grappled with the question of what reading does to one’s habits of mind has concluded that the process encourages rationality; that the sequential, propositional character of the written word fosters what Walter Ong calls the “analytic management of knowledge.” To engage the written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making, and reasoning. It means to uncover lies, confusions, and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another. To accomplish this, one must achieve a certain distance from the words themselves, which is, in fact, encouraged by the isolated and impersonal text . . . I do not mean to imply that prior to the written word analytic thought was not possible. I am referring here not to the potentialities of the individual mind but to the predispositions of a cultural mind-set.

In a culture dominated by print, public discourse tends to be characterized by a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas. (Postman, 1987, p. 51)

This is due to the nature of print itself: linear, sequential, rational, regularized, and repeatable, consisting of standardized black and white abstract marks, leading point by point, paragraph by paragraph, to a logical conclusion. Where this concerns our notions of truth and falsehood, Postman says, “Typography fostered the modern idea of individuality, but it destroyed the medieval sense of community and integration. Typography created prose, but made poetry into an exotic and elitist form of expression. Typography made modern science possible but transformed religious sensibility into mere superstition” (1987, p. 29).

McLuhan explained the results of a communication paradigm shift in terms of alteration of the ratio between the senses: “When the sense ratios alter in any culture, then what had appeared lucid before may suddenly be opaque, and what had been vague or opaque will become translucent” (1962, p. 41). We see this effect in the history of theology: In the thousand years prior to the printing press, there is little or no objection to the great majority of the Catholic distinctives, even among the learned: Mary, the Pope, the saints, transubstantiation, confession—the objections to these were so few prior to Gutenberg that any theology student could learn the names, places, and dates of every heresy, minority view, and doctrinal dispute in one semester. By contrast, more various theological doctrines and viewpoints appeared in the century that followed Gutenberg’s invention than in the 1500 years which preceded it.

Now of course print is a technology that reorders thought, as Ong often said. That reordering made the Reformation possible. Print isn’t just about producing books: It’s a cultural/theological dry-cleaning process. It favors the linear, rational, propositional, and sequential. It’s great for systematic theology and three-point sermons. But under the epistemology of print, whatever doesn’t fit that linear, rational, propositional model is held to be false, dangerous, or silly. (Put another way, it is like software that one’s operating system no longer supports.) And so by the time of the Enlightenment, visual-space Western culture had become acutely deaf to the supernatural, finally insisting that it didn’t exist. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, wasn’t a particularly wicked man, but a prescient figure: He predated Rudolf Bultmann by 150 years in “demythologizing” the Scriptures.

It would be as easy to explain the Reformation as the inevitable result of the printing press as it has been for earlier historians to ignore the effects of print entirely. This begs the question, however: “Why wasn’t every country that had the printing press similarly affected by the Reformation?” Along with Church opposition in Catholic countries, the answer appears to lie in the spread of the works of Peter Ramus (Ong, 1958/1983, pp. 295-297). While the printing press fostered and spread the Reformation, it was Ramism which then hardened Reformation thought into a brittle rationalism.

Ramus was the villain of the piece in both McLuhan’s doctoral dissertation at Cambridge and Ong’s dissertation at Harvard. He was what today we would call an



educational theorist. Prior to Ramus, from the time of Cicero and Isocrates to the Reformation, all formal schooling was conducted along the lines of the Trivium (the lower division of the liberal arts, comprised of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric). While the experts in each of these three arts considered their own art to be the most important and the other two arts subordinate to it, nonetheless the Trivium was taught as an interconnected group of disciplines, through which all other subjects were to be approached and mastered. Influenced by the visualist stress of typography, Ramus dropped grammar from his course of study, save for the purpose of learning to read and write (our present understanding of that word). He also reduced rhetoric to the mere verbal ornamentation of logical argument (hence our present and pejorative understanding of the word “rhetoric”).

By the most damnable turn of logic, Ramism used rhetoric also as an exegetical method, but not in the Ciceronian manner which any rhetorician might applaud. Instead, Miller (1961) cites its use in the hands of the Ramist-trained Puritans:

“If by the influx of latter arts (namely Grammar, Rhetorick, &c.) into the Text, Logic cannot be immediately examined,” said Chappell—that is, if the Holy Spirit spoke this or that truth in a simile or synecdoche and therefore the logical axiom was not at once visible—“then the words are first to be stript of those arts by some general explication, and the sense to be made plain, and so the way made ready for the Logical Analysis and assignation of the axiomes that they may appear therein.” (p. 341).

Marshall McLuhan (1943/2006) translates, “Rhetoric was a tool with which Puritans could plane off the colors of speech from Scriptural utterances, leaving the smooth white surface of ‘that one entire and naturall sense’” (p. 190).

Perry Miller explains:

Talon’s rhetoric was a godsend to men who professed to believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, who were not gifted with poetic insight, and who were somewhat deficient in humor: “Must wee actually sell all, taking up a Gibbet daily, lend freely, looking for nothing againe, turn the other cheek to him which smiteth one, plucke out our eyes, cut off right hands, &c.?” Fortunately we need not, for rhetoric makes us understand that these expressions are figurative, conveying an abstract truth which is much less incommodious. (Miller, as cited in McLuhan, 1943/2006, p. 191)

In its insistence on logic to the exclusion of all else, Ramism set aside grammar, aesthetics, and relationship. It removed all safeguards against ugly actions justified rationally, including the Scriptural safeguards. As our culture distances itself from the fruit of Ramism, as entailed in the shift from print to electronic media, we look back upon hundreds of years of such acts for which our ancestors are responsible, but which we can neither endorse nor explain.

Eric McLuhan explains the religious context of his father’s dissertation work, “The Protestants, he found in his research, had decided to regard faith in terms of ideas and concepts. Their decision meant that they had, in terms of the trivium, hitched their fortunes to dialectic, and abandoned the old alliance of rhetoric and

grammar to which the Church still resolutely adhered” (McLuhan, 1999, p. xv). In other words, McLuhan discovered that by emphasizing the propositional content of Scripture and discounting the narrative and poetic aspects of it, the Reformers had altered the content of the faith itself, and not always for the better. The new formulation was decidedly non-supernatural, and that as a result of expository method rather than theological conviction. Though the textual content of the Scriptures remained unchanged, the medium of communication and the style of discourse had changed, leading to significant differences in the body of belief transmitted. This split in the classical trivium mirrors and amplifies that between the head and the heart, which runs throughout the history of Western culture. It leads directly to “the triumph of the Newtonian worldview and its clockwork mechanical perfection, in 19th-century Europe” (McLuhan, 1995, p. 1).

Many narratives of faith and media end here. But the story continues.

Pentecostal worship follows closely both the timeline and the physical characteristics of electric media, starting with the telegraph and telephone: Real-time, intimate personal communication with a far-off being—from another world (or at least another state). Textual, no. Exciting, yes. The Charismatic Movement went mainline in the late 50s and early 60s—just as TV surpassed print as the dominant medium of communication. TV is tactile. Charismatic worship likewise is more immediate, engaging (even aerobic), more tactile and less formal than Pentecostal worship. De Kerckhove (1995, pp. 7-8) describes research at Simon Fraser University’s Media Analysis Lab which demonstrates that TV is a tactile medium. Just like McLuhan said.

And as electronic has supplanted typographic media, Noll and Nystrom (2005) describe “The decline of the Reformation,” as Catholic and Evangelical churches have come to resemble each other more, and the world around them less. With this, we are witnessing the decline of denominations: As we demand that our media be portable and our software applications be completely cross-platform, our spiritual practices have become so as well.

More recently, the Emerging Church movement is trying to preserve the best practices of prior eras. McKnight calls it “A post-Catholic form of Catholicism” (McKnight, 2005). Again, it’s the upper-tier Catholicism he’s speaking of: The arts, the spiritual disciplines, symbolism, the contemplative and supernatural, and service to the poor. There is also the “Third-Wave” Charismatic movement, which, like the Emerging Church movement, is based consciously or unconsciously on the characteristics of the Internet: Both are dynamic, creative, real-time interactive, decentralized, and cross-platform.

How do we understand these developments? One of the most promising approaches is Levinson’s “Chained Tetrads”:

As I pointed out in my 1977 Preface to McLuhan’s *Laws of Media*, there is a cyclical but progressive relationship among media and their effects which becomes plain when they are parsed according to the four “laws.” What radio obsolesces—visuality—television retrieves. And in so doing, television—what radio has flipped into—obsolesces the purely acoustic radio. There is a circularity of sorts here, which led

me to term this ongoing movement of media “Tetradic Wheels of Evolution” . . . in the paper I delivered at the 1978 Tetrad Conference with Marshall and Eric (and Robert Blechman and Jim Morriss) at Farleigh Dickinson University. But actually, as I explained in that paper, there is a real movement forward in this process—it is not just a circle—so it might better be termed a spiral. What television retrieves, as I indicated above, is a genuinely original compound of prior environments with some wholly new properties. Or we might say that although the reversal of radio into television retrieves what was obsolesced by radio—in this specific example, the visual—that rescued environment runs differently when it is enhanced by the new medium (television) than it did when it was obsolesced. (2001, pp. 190-191)

If we substitute the various forms of church over time for the forms of media over time, the above passage could well describe 2,000 years of church history. There is a certain tension, a necessarily poor fit between the church of one media era and that of the preceding one. But there is a natural (if less-than-obvious) affinity between the characteristics of the church(es) of the present media generation and those of two iterations back. The characteristics leapfrog, but “that rescued environment runs differently when it is enhanced by the new medium . . . than it did when it was obsolesced.” (The present era is illustrative: Both the newer Charismatic churches and the Emerging Church movement have recovered different aspects of pre-typographic, upper-tier spirituality, but they have done so without taking on the structure of the pre-Reformation church. We learn therefore that it does work, and that our practices do transplant from their original environments.)

Each of these media-forms of the church—Catholic, Evangelical, Charismatic, etc.—hosts a powerful delusion: If one *does some one thing*, one is thereby saved. In Catholicism, it’s the sacraments. Among Evangelicals, it’s correct doctrinal belief. For Charismatics, it’s dramatic spiritual experience. Each group agrees that this is not actually true—these things do not assure salvation—but in each group the delusion persists. Why? Because in each case, *the action given satisfies the demands of the medium which formed that expression of the church*.

I am not suggesting that we must each sew together our own spiritual practice out of the spare parts of preceding practices. Rather, I am suggesting that “beyond the maelstrom swims the babelfish.” If we recognize that we’ve really been arguing for millennia over media effects, then perhaps we will cease arguing. Then the resources and practices of our various churches simply become “ours.”

We become what we behold, Psalm 115 tells us. So we who are both media ecologists and believers would do well to recognize that the ultimate media shift has already happened in the Incarnation. This is the medium to which we are being conformed, and by which we are comforted. All the rest is details.

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