

Metamorphosis, Part 2 (Proliferating Ignorance)

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:3–4

Code: B100209

The World Wide Web had quietly been implemented less than a year after the Soviet Union broke up. Still, by 1993, when the first edition of *Ashamed of the Gospel* hit the shelves, no one but the earliest Internet insiders had even heard about the Web—much less seen it. Most people had no clue how quickly or how drastically the Web would alter the world as we knew it.

I remember being told at a strategic planning retreat in 1996 that the World Wide Web would eventually become the primary vehicle for the dissemination of our radio broadcast and recorded sermons. (At the time, radio and cassette tapes were still the only media we were using for audio content.) When the men at Grace to You who stay abreast of new technologies predicted that within twenty years or so cassette tapes would be a totally dead technology, I thought they were exaggerating. “You can’t access the Internet in a car,” I pointed out. “Even if you could, who wants to carry a computer on the car seat, when it’s so much more convenient to pop in a cassette tape?”

Technology is clearly not my forte.

The speed with which the world has caught onto the new media is mind-boggling. The convenience and velocity of Internet communications have changed almost every facet of how we live. The easy availability of so much information (and *misinformation*) has profoundly altered the way people learn and think and make decisions.

Meanwhile, the ease, immediacy, and affordability of Internet publishing has leveled the playing field between pundits and the proletariat. Anyone can start a blog, for free. Anyone with a computer (or cell phone) and an Internet connection can instantly broadcast his every opinion worldwide. Novices and scholarly authorities alike can employ the same media. Those who are most adept at gathering an audience are the ones who are being heard, not necessarily those most qualified to speak.

So many opinions and so much information all moving so quickly means a simple, off-the-cuff sound bite may be a thousand times more influential than a meticulously-researched treatise. In fact, whether something is true or false is usually deemed less important than the way the idea is communicated. (Today’s marketing strategies are based on that assumption.) Most people naturally prefer a punchy one-liner to a carefully-written essay. So style takes precedence over content in almost every venue. Sound-bites are simply easier to swallow than a serious discourse.

That reality is reflected in the way we digest the news, the way our politicians run their campaigns, and even the way people manage personal relationships. Text-messages are probably the most common form of communication between individuals. “Power-dating” has replaced courtship. “Quality time” is seen as a substitute for real parenting. The typical radio talk show invites listeners to call in, but the host invariably cuts callers off rudely if they can’t make a cogent point in four seconds or less. Interviewers on network television do the same thing to guests they invite to participate in panel discussions, squandering the panelists’ expertise in favor of keeping the show moving at a pace no

one can really keep up with anyway. It's the show, not the substance, that matters. The quest for a bigger audience-share trumps the truth. (And isn't that exactly like the philosophy that drives so many contemporary churches?)

I've participated in several of those televised panels, and sometimes the panelists are physically scattered across the continent, unable to see one another and barely able to make out the other speakers' sound-bites in those discreet earpieces. Even that doesn't matter. As long as the camera gives the *impression* of bringing many points of view face to face, the goal has been met. So what if no one gets to say more than half a sentence at a time? Our culture has simply lost patience with reasoned discourse and careful exposition.

It is not without significance that the most popular form of communication on the Internet at the moment is Twitter—an application that lets users broadcast their thoughts to the entire world in pithy quips. Each “Tweet” has a 140-character limit, and millions of them are sent every week. It's the next logical step in the evolution of the new media. Blogs have already begun to fade from the limelight. (The average blogpost is three paragraphs. Too wordy.)

Attention spans are getting shorter, literacy has suffered dramatically, and logic itself is frequently dismissed as unnecessarily pedantic. The Web is well-suited to a culture where what we “feel” is deemed more important than what we “think.” The Internet hosts millions of forums where people trade opinions and aphorisms, and these often become the electronic-data equivalent of acrimonious yelling matches. Internet forums are notorious for the profanity and hostility that dominate them. If you want vivid proof of human depravity in abundance, eavesdrop on practically any unmoderated Internet forum, including the ones devoted to discussing theology.

The Internet has created an ideal environment for postmodernism to flourish and spread—not in spite of all those shortcomings but precisely *because* of them.

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