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2004

Scripture Study in the Age of the New Media¹

Not long ago, a student of mine described a Bible study software package she had recently purchased for about one hundred dollars. This software package, which advertises itself as a PC-based “reference library,” contains complete texts of four versions of the Bible, cross reference resources, a Bible dictionary, an encyclopedia, two commentaries, word study reference works, and biblical language reference helps. It also includes maps, study guides, a reading plan, and a photo collection of notable geographical sites from the ancient near east. It even provides a place for “personal notes.” My student described this new acquisition not with the excitement of someone who has made a remarkable discovery but in a matter of fact way, almost as a parenthetical aside in an on-going conversation.

This incident is noteworthy not for being unusual but precisely because it typifies a generation of young adult students of the Bible who stand poised at the outset of a new millennium. She, like her contemporaries, is aptly described as a child of the digital age (Honen). Conversant and comfortable with personal computers and a host of software applications, she knows how to communicate electronically and has surfed the Internet for business, research, and recreation. Thanks to the technologies of digitization and computer-mediated communication (most strikingly evident in the Internet and the World

¹ This essay was published in *Critical Thinking and the Bible in the Age of New Media*, edited by Charles Ess (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004). The essay grew out of a presentation made on February 11, 2000, at a conference in New York called *New Faces, New Voices: Thinking about Bible Study in the 21st Century*, hosted by the Research Center for Scriptures and Media of the American Bible Society. An earlier version of the essay was also presented in March, 2002, at the 31st Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, in Lakeland, Florida. It appears in the society’s published proceedings for that annual meeting.

Wide Web) she enjoys almost immediate access to resources the likes of which could hardly have been imagined in the middle of the twentieth century. Primary sources like the Dead Sea scrolls, vast holdings of discipline-specific secondary professional writings, 3-D topographical maps of the ancient near east that permit “virtual” travel and exploration are all readily available to her. It is hardly surprising, then, that she sees nothing remarkable about owning a “reference library” of Bible software.

This student belongs to the same faith tradition that I claim as my own. But her approaches to Bible study as well as the circumstances in which she encounters the biblical text and related resources bear only a weak resemblance to those familiar to me from my childhood nearly half a century ago. Considering the sheer quantity of available materials, their variety and quality, as well as the sophistication of the technological devices and related software that grant quick, easy access to them, the advantages all lie with my student. Moreover, these advantages will undoubtedly only increase in the foreseeable future. However, I do not draw the comparison simply to applaud the substantial advances in Bible-related digital technology. Rather, I am concerned to identify and examine certain ways the new media foster attitudes and behaviors that militate against attempts to sustain what is valuable in the way particular faith traditions (such as my own) have studied the Bible. I shall clarify my thesis at the end of the next section after setting forth some of the salient features of traditional Bible study.

I.

Thinking back on the practice of Bible study as I knew it in my childhood, I have more distinct memories of the *occasions* of study than I do most of the specific content. By this I mean that although today I consider myself to be biblically literate, I have (with certain notable exceptions) few distinct memories of studying specific passages in the Bible. But I do recall with considerable clarity the occasions – the places, the ebb and

flow of time, the interpersonal dynamics among friends and family – in which Bible study became a cherished activity.

The places were familiar and conducive to human interaction: homes, Sunday school classrooms, the church sanctuary. In these places, spatial relations assumed concrete meaning. My peers and I measured near and far not in abstract units of feet and yards but in categories of immediate experience: lounging on the sofa next to my mother in the living room of our home listening to her read a narrative from the Bible; sitting on a chair, elbows on knees, across the Sunday school room from a teacher during the instructional time; or occupying just a certain pew in the church sanctuary during the Sunday worship service or the mid-week Bible study.

Time, too, was reckoned qualitatively, in palpable rhythms whose meter almost never synchronized precisely with the movement of the clock's hands. Depending on the type of activity and my own readiness, time might stand still or drag or march or slip away quickly. For my childhood peers and me, time allotted for Bible stories ended almost before it began, whereas time for reciting our "memory verses" contracted or expanded according to whether we had diligently attended to our homework. Bible study among certain adults whom I knew and respected was decidedly unhurried. They seemed to delight in it with a level of appreciation and discernment that exceeded my childish reach. The pace of their study was leisurely, sauntering, more often circuitous than goal oriented, in keeping with their contemplative and conversational approach toward confirming or challenging various interpretations of biblical passages.

My perception of the substantive message of the Bible was also shaped by the particular *way* the message was presented. Both in small group settings and in congregational worship, the Bible was commonly read aloud. Hearing the words in the distinctive cadences and intonations of the readers who enunciated them lent

intelligibility and authority to the text.² One of the few distinct memories I have of encountering a specific passage of the Bible is linked forever to the occasion of hearing it. Even now, many years after my grandfather's death, I recall clearly his resonant voice reading from the gospel of Luke at the annual Christmas gathering of our extended family. Moreover, pastors and teachers used their active presence as a medium for teaching, and what they taught emerged partly from the words they uttered but also partly from physical cues such as the way they held the Bible, gestured to emphasize a point, furrowed their eye-brows questioningly, nodded in affirmation, or touched a neighbor's hand or arm as if to invite special consideration for a certain idea.³

Walter Ong has correctly observed that the field of biblical study has generated what is undoubtedly the most massive body of textual commentary in the world (173). This fact had little significance for the faith community that I knew in my childhood, where study resources were limited in quantity and modest in quality. The best of the abundant printed resources to which Ong was no doubt referring were either housed at locations far removed from my community or too expensive for most parishioners. Consequently, when members of my faith community studied the Bible, they relied heavily on pastors, teachers, and senior members in the congregation for guidance, expecting them to confirm or challenge their reading of particular passages. Auditing the various exchanges among adults, my peers and I gleaned insights about the meaning of biblical narratives, discerned the rudiments of the faith community's theological commitments, and assimilated its hermeneutical assumptions. Equally importantly, we

²In this connection, Walter Ong's comment on the force of the spoken word comes to mind: "The interiorizing force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence" (74).

³This description of the bodily cues that facilitate understanding in Bible study groups calls to mind Shoshana Zuboff's description of the interpersonal dynamics among pulp mill workers in which senior employees transmitted knowledge of their skills to their junior colleagues. Significantly, in the 1970s and 1980s, as mills were in the throes of massive modernization efforts that would place every aspect of the production process under computer control, these workers faced problems analogous to those under consideration in this essay.

were exposed to the collective wisdom of the senior generation, this wisdom being something different from the accumulation of discrete data or isolated propositions. In short, pastors and other senior members of the faith community safeguarded and mediated the transmission of the biblical text.

Devotional and confessional Bible study as I remember it functioned not only as a source of enlightenment and encouragement to individuals but also as a way of integrating the individual into the faith community.⁴ Incorporated as it was into the rhythms of daily life and habits of the people, it represented one of the principal recurring occasions for encountering one another in homes and in the church. Studying the Bible with friends and relatives provided a doorway for entering into trust relationships and a forum for transmitting acquired knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next. In this way it strengthened the faith community.⁵

If the preceding recollections have identified salient features of traditional Bible study, the question naturally arises whether these features are safeguarded and strengthened, left unchanged, or threatened and undermined by technological developments in the age of the new digital media. I believe the last alternative accurately represents the current state of affairs and this in two ways. First, the new media, for all their potential to make available the best and most extensive biblical resources,

⁴By setting forth the preceding (mainly favorable) description, I am not suggesting that Bible study in the middle of the twentieth century was free of problems and stress points. Dubious hermeneutical assumptions yielded unconventional, eccentric, or anachronistic readings. Proof-texting was an ever-present danger. Differences of interpretation among people otherwise kindly disposed toward each other sometimes erupted into heated exchanges. By the middle of the twentieth century, cultural and technological changes were also already impinging on the process. The transistor radio, the television, and the automobile all made strong claims at a time in which social status and economic aspiration loomed large. In the increasingly busy climate of the post-war years, reflective people were compelled to question how or whether devotional Bible study as they had come to practice it could continue to play a central role in their lives.

⁵My experiences were hardly unique. Setting aside certain specific differences of theology, liturgy, and worship, the general features of Bible study described here are recognizable in the practices of other people of faith throughout the country during the same period. As it was for my own friends and family, Bible study among many others was contextual rather than abstract, empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced.

encourage users to blur the distinction between the act of gathering information and the process of reflectively, contextually making sense of information. Second, the most rapidly developing facet of the new media and the one with the most potential to transform contemporary life – the Internet – encourages forms of anonymity and social isolation that threaten to estrange people from their faith community, the relevant social context in which traditional Bible study occurred. In following two sections, I make the case for these claims.

II.

In “Redeeming the Time,” an article promoting use of computers and software in Bible study, Nick Nicholaou argues that using time efficiently is one of the primary reasons to consider acquiring Bible-study software. To support his thesis, he cites a pastor of a large California-based church who claims that as a result of using Bible-study software he was able to reduce his weekly sermon and Bible study time significantly: “[Bible study software] saves me a lot of time . . . My own experience is that through the more focused use of Bible-study software, God can guide me to the message he wants me to communicate in nearly half the time” (21). Setting aside the impertinent question of how one measures the rate at which God communicates a message, this pastor (and by extension the author) leaves no doubt that when it comes to studying the Bible speed and efficiency are both possible and desirable.⁶

⁶Nicholaou’s emphases on speed and efficiency are perfectly in keeping with the times. A decade ago, Alvin Toffler called attention to the accelerated pace of change and anticipated its consequences when he predicted that the world’s next fundamental confrontation would not take place between East and West, nor North and South, but between “the fast and the slow.” (Toffler was referring to global economies, but his analysis also seems pertinent for individuals and subcultures.) More recently in *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, James Gleick advanced a related claim: “We are in a rush. We are making haste. A compression of time characterizes the life of the century now closing” (9). According to Gleick, the leading edge technologies are the ones governed by “Moore’s Law,” named after Gordon Moore the founder of Intel who, in 1965, predicted that microchip miniaturization would lead to a doubling of computer power every eighteen months (77).

Of course, “redeeming the time” is a biblical expression, a fact Nicholaou clearly wishes to exploit. By appropriating these words from the epistle to the Ephesians and making them function as the title of his essay, he invokes the authority of Scripture to support his thesis. But exegetically his interpretation fails. In the biblical context, the reader is admonished to redeem the time, “because the days are evil” (5:16 NRSV). In one sense, of course, the case for not wasting one’s resources (including available time) is unimpeachable. But exploiting the Ephesians passage as a proof text to justify the use of Bible-study software is a dubious strategy. To begin with, the justificatory clause, “because the days are evil,” hardly supports the view that economy of time was uppermost in the biblical writer’s thinking. In all likelihood, “redeeming the time” has more to do with engaging the prevailing culture circumspectly, adopting a more deliberate and thoughtful posture toward all of life’s tasks, and evaluating one’s choices in terms of what finally matters. In other words, precisely because the days are evil, people of faith should first and foremost reflectively evaluate their deeds in the light of ultimate concerns. This reading of the biblical passage leads to a rather different orientation toward Bible study software and other new-media dependent Bible study resources than the one suggested by Nicholaou. Particularly for people of faith, who approach the biblical text devotionally or confessionally, it shifts the emphasis away from one question and toward another: away from “Do the new digital media allow me to use my time in the most economical way?” and toward “Do these media facilitate understanding the biblical text?”

Contrary to current popular opinion, the two questions are not synonymous. Moreover, the answer to the second question is not inevitably affirmative. In this connection, and by way of illustration, consider once again my student’s recently acquired “reference library” software. Like other similar packages intended for general retail consumption, this product is not a true Bible study suite but simply a bundle of discrete products packaged to give the illusion of forming an integrated unit. Moreover,

its components vary widely in quality and applicability to specific audiences. For instance, one of the language resources, Brown, Driver, and Briggs' *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, a standard reference work well-known to scholars, is too technical for anyone who does not already know biblical Hebrew and is therefore of little use to general readers. At the other extreme, Matthew Henry's commentary, one of the two complete commentaries included in the software package, is an antiquated reference work (really little more than a historical relic) and has no place in a twenty-first century reference library.⁷ In addition, although the package offers four versions of the Bible (KJV, NIV, NKJV, ASV) only one of them (NIV) even remotely lays claim to being a credible contemporary version; two others (KJV, ASV) contain dated idioms and do not reflect the best current scholarship; and one (NKJV) suffers the ignominious distinction of being the only modern version whose translators intentionally reverted to an inferior edition of the underlying manuscripts.⁸ These deficiencies will not be readily apparent to uninformed customers inclined to view the purchase price as reasonable in comparison to the cost of printed materials purchased separately. But when they become apparent, the users will discover that the package, far from offering instant enlightenment, actually exacts a heavy cost in money (to buy it) and time (to install it and laboriously discover its limitations).

To be sure, specific deficiencies in Bible study software can be addressed in upgraded versions and in new products. Strategies for improvement seem likely to follow two primary tracks. Along the first track, users can expect to see more and better attempts at creating truly integrated software packages. The second track leads straight to the Internet, where users can expect to find increasingly comprehensive resources. Quite

⁷ It is not unreasonable to speculate that, since the text is in the public domain, the software developers included it only because they could add a title to the package without incurring an obligation to pay royalties.

⁸For a more detailed analysis of these and other versions, see Kubo and Specht.

simply, in every area of biblical inquiry, the Internet will make more information available more quickly than anyone acquainted with traditional Bible study fifty years ago could ever have imagined.⁹

These two tracks – one leading to more powerful, integrated software suites for PCs, the other to the Internet – are not identical and not precisely parallel.¹⁰ Nevertheless, they are related, and each in its own way supports the thesis asserted earlier, that the new media blur the distinction between the act of gathering information and the process of reflectively, contextually making sense of information. Thus, the track leading to integrated Bible study software packages promises several appealing features. Because future software suites will be designed to run on the latest generation of computers, they (compared to their predecessors) will perform more responsively and will have higher audio-video resolution and other features that generally enhance their multimedia capability. The best ones will function interactively and provide access to local databases. They will also provide links to the second track, the Internet (“the information highway”), which in turn will grant access to large remote databases and facilitate forays into virtual reality. The latter will permit users to do such things as take virtual-tours of first-century Palestine, participate in virtual-digs at archaeological sites in the Near East, or virtually-rediscover the Dead Sea scrolls. Most importantly, however, improved Bible

⁹In the words of Albert Borgmann, “The ideal limit of hyperreality is encyclopedic completeness” (*Crossing* 88). This assessment of the new media coincides with Borgmann’s broader analysis of the promise of modern technology. “Technology, as we have seen, promises to bring the forces of nature and culture under control, to liberate us from misery and toil, and to enrich our lives. . . . As a first step let us note that the notions of liberation and enrichment are joined in that of availability. Goods that are available to us enrich our lives and, if they are technologically available, they do so without imposing burdens on us. Something is available in this sense if it has been rendered instantaneous, ubiquitous, safe, and easy” (*Technology* 41). Also see chapter 8 “The Promise of Technology” and chapter 9 “The Device Paradigm” in *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* and his earlier description of availability in “Technology and Reality” (62). Other important treatments of technology by him appear in “Orientation in Technology” and “The Explanation of Technology.” His most extensive treatment of information technology appears in *Holding On to Reality, The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*.

¹⁰The process of improving stand-alone Bible study products will likely eventuate in the disappearance of such products in the strict sense (i.e., as true stand-alone products) since their ultimate “improvement” will lead developers to connect them to large databases on the Internet.

study software suites and Internet applications/sites will be developed for users having specific needs or abilities (e.g., middle-school children, adult learners, scholars) or will contain self-selection features designed to accomplish the same kind of discrimination among users. In short, they promise to be eminently “user friendly.”

The question, of course, is whether “user friendly” equates with “promotes understanding.” New media proponents claim that it does. Indeed, in their estimation, the information revolution as it relates to Bible study resources represents a major improvement over traditional approaches.¹¹ The best new software suites, so the argument goes, will select, categorize, filter, organize, and order the data they make available. By performing these important manipulations on the data they will quickly, seamlessly, and colorfully present the most relevant information to the user, who will then presumably be optimally positioned to understand what is so presented.

But this argument is specious. An integrated software suite or an Internet site might well perform its functions flawlessly and exhibit the results in an eye-catching graphical interface and yet fail to promote true understanding if it fails to promote a searching, critical assessment of the information it so pleasingly presents on screen. In other words, digital Bible study products that do not engage the user’s capacities for critical reasoning (capacities for analysis, synthesis, logical evaluation, and reflection) will not lead to true understanding – regardless of how much information they make available, regardless of how many organizational and filtering functions they perform, and regardless of how invitingly they present the data. Thus, for instance, locating and viewing a crisp digitized image of an ancient artifact, archaeological site, or map of the ancient Near East is not the same as grasping the historical, social, political, or religious significance of those items. Understanding these things within the context of their

¹¹Some technologists and educational theorists advance the claim that electronic media are the preferred, if not only, instruments for reforming educational institutions and practices. Some attribute extraordinary capabilities to the new media and even speak of the computer’s call (Hannafin and Savenye 26). Others admiringly describe the computer as the electronic doorway in educational restructuring (Solomon 327).

worldview involves more than gathering information about them; it also requires critical assessment. Similarly, having ready computer access to a biblical passage, even if presented in several contemporary versions and juxtaposed with the relevant Greek or Hebrew text, is something different from reading that passage attentively, in context, with a critical, interpretive eye.

Proponents of digital technology, of course, contend that the new media offer a better prospect of transforming learners from passive recipients to active choosers and critical thinkers than do traditional forms of study (Solomon; Ehrmann). The argument has two parts. The first involves the claim that traditional Bible study follows a parochial and authoritarian model that impedes the development of critical thinking skills.¹² The traditions and social dynamics described in the preceding section appear antiquated and constraining. The new digital media, according to its proponents, represent the best prospects for liberating learners from arbitrary authority and parochial perspectives. Moreover, the new media, they claim, free us from the accidental confinements of space and time. Students of the Bible no longer have to depend on deficient holdings in local church libraries or public libraries but are able to travel to the world's best archives, libraries, and museums with the click of a button, selecting at will the materials most suited to their needs. (Prior to the digital revolution, presumably, students of the Bible suffered from a poverty of information, particularly from too little exposure to the best scholarly resources.) The second part of the argument says that the new media actually do promote critical thinking by providing access to certain kinds of information, such as a wide range of scholarly opinion.

¹²The idea is that in traditional models of education one (or a few) authority(ies) dispense information at their pleasure to others who must accept what they are offered. To illuminate this relationship, Oblinger and Maruyama employ the "factory model," in which students presumably are the workers and instructors the bosses (3). Borgmann, who is critical of this view, invokes ancient imagery from the book of Genesis. "In the traditional circumstances of education, as the proponents of technological information see them, the teacher is someone like Joseph, the governor of Egypt under the Pharaoh. The students are like Joseph's brothers who come asking for provender and must accept whatever Joseph parcels out" (*Holding On* 205).

In certain respects, of course, the first part of the argument is not without merit. If a Bible study leader, Sunday school teacher, or pastor lacks appropriate education to address difficult interpretive questions or holds simplistic or dogmatic positions, parishioners (particularly young adults) will understandably feel liberated by having access to wider sources of information through digital media. Also, students of the Bible old enough to remember when study resources were limited in number and quality will view the ability to retrieve versions, commentaries, and other study helps electronically from remote sites as a godsend.

But what seem to be liberating factors do not come without cost. One such cost appears in the way digital riches produce what Albert Borgmann calls “a deceptive sense of facility” (*Holding On* 209). Thus, for example, the beginning Greek student who gains instant access to an electronic database that definitively identifies the form of every word in the Greek text of the New Testament may well feel liberated from the cumbersome process of committing roots of words to memory and painstakingly coming to terms with the declensions of nouns, conjugations of verbs, and the logic of syntax. But the difficult, sometimes tedious, processes that such facility allows one to skirt constitute the inescapable preconditions for becoming truly conversant with the original language of the New Testament. Similarly, with regard to study of the English Bible, what seem like constraints on freedom – reading and re-reading the biblical text, setting aside time to patiently examine and evaluate secondary sources, attentively attending to a teacher’s or pastor’s exegetical comments – are often actually the disciplines and practices of engagement within which information is most likely to become knowledge. In the home or in the church, these may include devotional disciplines like reflecting on the meaning of a certain biblical passage, prayerfully participating in a liturgy as part of a worship service, or meeting with a group of friends to discuss the social justice implications of a certain passage of the Scripture.

By contrast, having unfettered access to vast amounts of data encourages the false impression that the sheer ability to locate particular items of information in an electronic database or on the Internet counts as *knowing* what one has thus located.¹³ But information is not the same as knowledge. Information is homogeneous. Discrete bits of digital information can be assimilated to the fields of any sophisticated database. Knowledge, by contrast, always takes an articulate form. It arises from patterns of justification, and these in turn find their place in larger epistemological and social contexts. When people seek knowledge but get information instead, it is because they have lost sight of this principle that knowledge requires a context of justification and explanation. In decades past, parents, extended family, and the church community provided the relevant context of justification and explanation within which traditional Bible study took place. When study resources were rare, parents, teachers, and pastors read the Bible to children, teenagers, and other adults. Within the limits of their education and life experience, they commented on and illuminated the text. Through their explanations and responses to questions, they made the text intelligible and brought it to life in particular places at particular times – which is to say, within a spatial and temporal order that expressed their faith community’s distinctive traditions and social structure.

¹³By way of analogy, consider the following telling incident from a public school setting recounted by David Pepi and Geoffrey Scheurman. They describe a college student who, as a requirement for a professional education course, had constructed a poster dealing with a contemporary educational problem. According to their account, the poster, which mainly presented comments from people across the country who had been discussing the topic through an electronic newsgroup, was eye-catching. “The technology-enhanced beauty of the poster was breathtaking, and we spent the better part of a 10-minute encounter talking with the student about the various applications that contributed to its aesthetic appeal. What we found troubling was how difficult it was to shift the discussion to the substantive issues the poster raised. When we finally asked the student to tell us about the nature of the dialogue on the issue, her response was immediate: I got it off the Internet. Looking at one of the more provocative statements, one of us asked about the context in which the comment was made. It was on a newsgroup on the Internet. We asked, Well, who made the statement? Where did he or she come from? Peering closely at her own poster, the student replied, I think he was from Seattle; I guess he’s a teacher or something. I got it off the Internet” (232). Pepi and Scheurman lament that the student seemed to have understood the purpose of the assignment as using technology to collect information rather than as addressing the credibility of the information or the nature of the arguments. In this day and age when scripture resources are so widely available through the Internet, we should not be surprised to find cases in which students of the Bible similarly confuse the task of acquiring information with the higher order critical thinking process that leads to knowledge.

Norman Maclean, author of the celebrated novella *A River Runs Through It*, recalled just such practices from his childhood in Missoula, Montana: “After breakfast and again after what was called supper, my father read to us from the Bible or from some religious poet such as Wordsworth; then we knelt by our chairs while my father prayed. My father read beautifully. He avoided the homiletic sing-song most ministers fall into when they look inside the Bible or edge up to poetry, but my father overread poetry a little so that none of us, including him, could miss the music.” With apparent regret, Maclean says, “I need hardly tell you that families no long read to each other. I am sure it leaves a sound-gap in family life”(McFarland and Nichols 84, 22).

In “Scriptural Literacy,” Peter Feuerherd makes the case that basic biblical literacy has been declining for a number of years. “Almost every American has at least one Bible,” Feuerherd notes. “Yet, public opinion surveys show, for many, it is a kind of treasured heirloom hidden away in an attic gathering dust, much of its content an inscrutable mystery. Relatively few have a working knowledge of its content.”¹⁴ Feuerherd quotes pollster George W. Gallup as saying, “We revere the Bible, but we don’t read it.” Gallup’s research shows that the numbers of those who read the Bible at all have declined from 73 percent of the population in 1990 to just 59 percent in 2001. Moreover, among those who read the Bible, most are doing it alone; only about 14 percent participate in a regular Bible study group. These findings are intriguing in light of the fact that digital media in general, and the Internet in particular, have experienced explosive growth during the decade of the 1990s, the same period that Feuerherd discusses in his article. Social theorists may someday be able to provide a comprehensive

¹⁴Among the findings Feuerherd cites are the following: Despite all the controversy about its placement on the public school walls, most Americans can name only half of the Ten Commandments; many Americans believe that the Sermon on the Mount was delivered by Dr. Billy Graham and that Joan of Arc is the name of Noah’s wife; 80 percent of Christians who claim to be “born again” believe that the saying “God helps them that help themselves” (coined by Ben Franklin) is a quotation from the Bible; less than half of Americans, about 40 percent, read the Bible every week; and about 40 percent erroneously believe that the entire Bible was written after Jesus’ birth.

explanation for this convergence of facts. Short of such an account, it may be impossible to demonstrate a causal relationship between the historical trend away from traditional forms of Bible study and the current weak state of biblical literacy. In any event, there is little reason to believe that the new media, glowing promises to the contrary notwithstanding, have had any discernible impact in slowing the decline of biblical literacy. Evidently, the new digital media are not (or at least not yet) the doorways to liberation they are sometimes made out to be (Solomon).

To turn to the second part of my argument – nor is it clear that the new digital media promote active decision making and critical thinking better than traditional methods of Bible study. The claim that they do rests in part on an optimistic assessment of what computers can (or will eventually be able to) do and partly on a faulty view of traditional methods of Bible study.

The promise held forth for digital technologies in general is that they will someday be fully interactive and fully capable of exploiting advances in artificial intelligence. Insofar as the new media relate to Bible study resources (stand-alone PC software and Internet sites), this promise has not yet been fulfilled. The current state of digital Bible study resources, though impressive, largely represents an extension of the kinds of resources already available to scholars in the print medium or by direct physical inspection. Thus, electronic databases extend the reach of lexicons, encyclopedias, and concordances; and compress the time necessary for information searches. Geography programs make it possible to view the terrain of the Middle East with a greater sense of fluidity and “realism” than still photographs, with more flexibility than videos, and with less expense and bother than actually going on location. Museum and archive Internet sites facilely display digitized photos together with brief written descriptions of artifacts that would otherwise require much time and expense to view in person. However, none of these operations fully exemplifies the cognitive processes ordinarily associated with critical thinking.

The significance of this point becomes apparent if we consider how the new media might assist someone who wishes to understand a certain difficult passage in the Bible. As we have noted before, these media are well suited to presenting the text in multiple versions and in its original language; providing access to various study helps of the sort mentioned above; and making scholarly commentaries available. Any or all of these resources can be helpful in developing a rich understanding of the text in question. But for this to happen, the person using them must already possess a fairly high level of critical reasoning skill. Thoughtful, well-reasoned commentaries, for example, can serve as models for responsible interpretation and can thus provide useful points of departure in a complicated process that may eventuate in the reader's arriving at a plausible judgment of her own about the meaning of the biblical text. But merely having commentaries available, without the reader also bringing to the text an appropriate background and mental aptitude, will not yield a rich understanding of the text and will not inevitably enhance the reader's capacity for critical thought. This is so because both the biblical text as well as the commentaries intended to illuminate it represent classic instances of what learning theorists call "ill structured problems" – problems for which there is no easy, obvious, or single solution (Resnick). A student who encounters five options for each question on a multiple-choice examination (and who is also told that in every instance one of the options is the correct answer) does not face an ill-structured problem. The student's problem is straightforward ("well-structured"): to determine which of the five options is the correct answer to a (presumably) clearly expressed question. But the reader of the biblical text does not necessarily know whether *any* of the commentators has the correct answer to her question(s). Indeed, the fact that eminent Bible scholars sometimes differ over the meaning of important passages constitutes *prima facie* evidence that the text – at least initially, and perhaps indefinitely – is susceptible of being read fruitfully from multiple perspectives. More crucially, she does not necessarily know whether she has posed the correct question(s) to the text itself. Thus, depending on the specific

question(s) she asks, one or a few or all or none of the commentators might have the correct answer or a partially correct answer. Part of what it means to be a critical thinker in such instances is to possess both a well-developed sense of the importance of formulating questions and a measure of critical reserve (not skepticism, but the willingness and ability to live with ambiguity and indeterminacy). Thus, learning theorists who describe higher order thinking not simply in terms of thinking about and choosing correct answers from among available options but in terms of *problem-finding abilities* (Arlin) or *stages of reflective judgment necessary for dealing with ill-structured problems* (King and Kitchener) will justifiably be unimpressed with claims that certain Bible study media promote critical thinking if in fact those media primarily present multiple stimuli for analysis and reflection. The latter is not unimportant, but it also does not count as a strategy for developing critical reasoning.

Do traditional forms of Bible study fare any better in developing critical thinking skills? It is possible to answer this question negatively but only by assuming that they depend almost exclusively on simple models of rote memorization, transference of information from one person to another, or outright indoctrination. These techniques, of course, have been evident in traditional Bible study and remain a continuing point of concern. But instruction by nurturing and mentoring more aptly define traditional Bible study at its best, and these educational strategies are in fact quite conducive to the development of critical thinking.

Why so? The answer lies partly in the complex nature of critical thinking itself. According to Peter Facione, “Engaging in reasoned judgment about what to believe and what to do requires the skills and the disposition to think critically.” In other words, critical thinking – the process of engaging in purposeful reasoned judgment¹⁵ – is not a

¹⁵The APA Delphi report describes critical reasoning as “purposeful, self-regulatory judgment. In this process we give reasoned consideration to the evidence, context, conceptualizations, methods, and criteria by which those judgments are made” (Facione “Critical Thinking”).

purely cognitive skill, not purely an act of a facile mind. It also involves a certain *disposition* (or consistent internal inclination) to use one's skills to form reasoned judgments.¹⁶ Facione contends that this disposition is characterized by certain habits of mind, among them truth-seeking, open-mindedness, inquisitiveness, and confidence in reasoning.¹⁷ Now if critical thinking is complex in the way Facione describes, involving both cognitive skill and disposition, we should wonder not only how the cognitive skills are acquired but also how the dispositional features are acquired. Perhaps the case can be made that purely cognitive skills can be acquired by abstract means.¹⁸ But if we take seriously the comments of people like Norman Maclean, quoted earlier, we will conclude that the dispositional aspect of critical reasoning results from nurturing and mentoring – in his case by his father, who read to him, taught him how to pray (not so much by precept as by example), and instilled in him a love of the Bible and poetry. But we must be clear here that the style of instruction involved in nurturing and mentoring is less like transferring information than developing a collaborative, trust-based relationship in

¹⁶The California Academic Press, which has developed an assessment instrument called The California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTDI), defines the disposition to think critically this way: “There is a characterological profile, a constellation of attitudes, a set of intellectual virtues, or, if you will, a group of habits of mind which we refer to as the overall disposition to think critically.” “The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit.” See their site at <<http://www.calpress.com/cctdi.html>>

¹⁷Facione's schema actually incorporates seven dispositions toward critical reasoning. He explains these seven habits as follows: Truth-seeking: Courageously desiring of best knowledge in any context, even if such knowledge fails to support or may undermine one's own preconceptions, beliefs or self-interests; Open-Mindedness: Tolerant of divergent views, self-monitoring for possible bias; Analyticity: Demanding the application of reason and evidence, alert to problematic situations, inclined to anticipate consequences; Systematicity: Valuing organization, focus and diligence to approach problems of all levels of complexity; Inquisitiveness: Being curious and eager to acquire knowledge and learn explanations even when the applications of that information are not immediately apparent; Self-confidence in Reasoning: Trusting of one's own reasoning skills and seeing oneself as a good thinker; Cognitive Maturity: Prudence in making, suspending, or revising judgment, an awareness that multiple solutions can be acceptable, and an appreciation of the need to reach closure even in the absence of complete knowledge.

¹⁸I doubt that this is actually so but do not feel compelled to develop an argument at this point.

which certain kinds of responses can be called forth. In the words of Henry Bugbee, “the sense of responsibility for meaning is the key to the development of the educational potential of the person; and this is evoked” (4).

The burden of this section has been to show that, for all their potential to make available the best and most extensive resources for Bible study, the new media in certain crucial respects encourage users to blur the distinction between the act of gathering information and the process of critically evaluating that information. (They do this in several ways, such as by creating a false sense of facility or inviting the view that information counts as knowledge.) This tendency to blur the distinction between the two is pernicious because it threatens certain valuable functions of traditional Bible study such as those having to do with the way we orient our lives morally and spiritually. As Stephen O’Leary and Brenda Brasher eloquently observe, “When ... the whole record of human culture is digitized and available on computer databases connected to each other by a global web, our spiritual crisis will remain and even intensify, for we will be forced to confront the fact that no electronic alchemy can turn information into knowledge or into the wisdom that will teach us how to live” (262).

But if critical reasoning is complex in the way Facione claims, and if the dispositional component of critical reasoning (to say nothing of its cognitive component) is evoked through nurturing and mentoring, then we should expect that the future development of mature reflection on the Bible – reflection of the sort that can engender knowledge and teach us how to live – will depend on the continued vitality and coherence of communities of interpretation, which are the social contexts within which nurturing and mentoring take place. What is the impact of the new media on these social contexts? It is to this question that I turn in the next section.

III.

The promise of the new media is that they will both bring about vital transformations of traditional expressions of religion and also foster new forms of religious community, which though different from traditional forms of community, will nonetheless function as legitimate and viable expressions of community.¹⁹ The Internet, we are told, will liberate people from the constraints of geography or isolation brought on by stigma, illness, or schedule, and will allow people to affiliate with others on the basis of common interest rather than convenience (Katz and Aspden; Rheingold).²⁰

In support of the claim that the new media foster new forms of community, one can point to Internet sites designed specifically for people of faith. Both Faithnet.com (“a collaboration of Christian communities interacting live on-line”) and Beliefnet.com (mission: “To do whatever it takes to help individuals meet their own needs in the realm of religion, spirituality and morality”) advertise a wide array of interactive opportunities for people of faith. LifeOfTheWorld.com, a Web site affiliated with Concordia Theological Seminary, claims to provide a single comprehensive source of information with daily scriptures, devotions, and insightful articles about Christ, coupled with news, weather, sports and shopping. *Christianity Today, Inc.* sponsors two venues: an interactive forum called Daily Bible Study Chats (“Join in one of our daily hosted Bible

¹⁹O’Leary and Brasher seem to acknowledge this point: “[W]e are willing to risk the claim that religious discourse on the global network shows signs of a new and vital response to the anomic condition that Philip Rieff has characterized as ‘post-communal culture,’ in which the breakdown of traditional social and religious institutions results in atomization and alienation of the self. While the traditional forms of religion appear to be flourishing in the new electronic forum, subtle changes are taking place and new genres of religious discourse, such as online prayer and cyber-rituals, are emerging” (243).

²⁰One of the populations until recently most resistant to trends in new media, the elderly, now seem to be increasingly willing not only to access resources and services online but also eager to seek out social interaction. According to David LaGesse, “The rush online by seniors, now the fastest-growing population of surfers, is just a hint of how technology might transform elderly lives. New products reach beyond the Internet’s communication and entertainment features, promising to bolster independence for tomorrow’s retirees while helping them fight the isolation and illness that can accompany aging” (78). Web sites devoted to the social interests of the elderly include www.aarp.com, www.elderhostel.org, www.geezer.com, www.seniortheatre.com, www.seniornet.org, www.seniorjournal.com, and www.seniors-site.com. (“Netting Answers On the Web” 78, 79).

studies. Learn and grow as you open God’s word with other believers.”) and a posting site called Bible & Theology Message Board (“Add your posting to the thousands discussing doctrine, the end times, and other hot issues.”). Those who seek religiously centered entertainment (“products that reflect what we believe in”) need only log on to iChristian.com, which claims to have the Web’s largest selection of “Bible-centered,” entertainment products for the entire family. The list goes on.²¹

Despite the proliferation of Web sites like these, recent assessments cast suspicion on the claims for benefits associated with Internet use. For instance, transformations are beginning to appear in the way people of faith (particularly the young) think about themselves, conceptualize their faith, and relate to other people of faith. These transformations include increased incidences of feelings of isolation and estrangement as well as theological trends toward fundamentalism and eclecticism. According to *Newsweek*’s John Leland, “This broad pattern of belief – the simultaneous rise of both fundamentalism and eclecticism – accelerates through the Internet. Religious chat rooms and Web sites like Faithnet or Beliefnet act like spiritual supermarkets, offering an assortment of belief systems all within one click. . . . The Web’s influence will only grow as online faith-based services become more sophisticated, targeting ever more select micro-congregations” (63).

Concerning community formation, a major empirical study by a research team at Carnegie Mellon University has found that although the Internet is designed to be a social technology it actually reduces social involvement and has other negative psycho-social consequences as well (Kraut, et.al.). Reviewing the current discussion about the social impact of computer technology, these researchers identified several possible uses of the Internet, including both *asocial* and *social* purposes. *Asocial* uses are ones that make it easier for people to be alone and independent, such as using the Internet to enhance

²¹ O’Leary and Brasher discuss current trends at some length. (248ff)

private entertainment, to obtain information from remote sources, to increase technical skills, or to conduct commercial transactions. *Social* uses are ones that allow people to communicate or socialize with colleagues, friends, and family through e-mail or joining social groups through distribution lists, news groups, or MUDs.²² The Carnegie Mellon researchers found that interpersonal communication – communication for social purposes – is the dominant use of the Internet at home. However, contrary to expectations, they also found that increased Internet use among the study’s participants “led to their having, on balance, less social engagement and poorer psychological well-being” (1018). These findings struck the research team as paradoxical: Although the Internet is a social technology and although the main reason people use it at home is to facilitate interpersonal communication, increased use of the Internet turns out to correlate with declines in social involvement – less communication within the family, diminished size of people’s local social networks, more loneliness, and more depression. Moreover, these correlations seem to be causal, not simply coincidental. “Our analyses are consistent with the hypothesis that using the Internet adversely affects social involvement and

²²One of the remarkable incongruities associated with the Internet is that even though people think of it as the most public of all utilities (hardware and software developers and users almost universally believe that it should be allowed to expand without government control and corporate coercion and that it should function both as a vast world-wide public market place for commerce and as a public forum for exchanging ideas) they also believe that this market place/public forum should be accessible with the highest possible degree of privacy. We are left then with the intriguing notion of an open market place/public forum to which participants come, if not in disguise, at least anonymously – knowing no one and being known by no one. This incongruity shows up in part in the ambivalent view of increasing numbers of Internet users, who want not only to be connected electronically to as many people and places as possible but also to have their privacy protected. Thus, as Peter McGrath points out, “The world of ubiquitous computing raises a number of questions. High among them is the issue of inescapability. ‘In practice,’ says Livermore, president of enterprise computing at Hewlett-Packard, who says, ‘the slogan *Anytime, anywhere* means *All the time, everywhere*.’ Even greater, though, is the problem of privacy, when pervasive in fact means invasive. There is no precedent for the idea of self-executing devices that are ubiquitous, networked and always on. If your car knows when you’re intoxicated, why can’t it also inform a police car. If a communicating pacemaker can tell your doctor that you’re on the verge of a cardiac event, why can’t it also tell your insurance company” (“If All the World’s a Computer . . .” 72,73). For some recent analysis of privacy issues in cyberspace, see “Guarding Online Privacy”(Branscum); “Cyberprivacy: How Savvy is the Public?”(*Business Week*); “Online Privacy: It’s Time for Rules in Wonderland” (Green et al.); “Millennial McLuhan: Clues for Deciphering the Digital Age” (Levenson); “Kowing You all too Well” (McGrath); “Losing Your Good Name Online” (Sandberg); “Service Offers Anonymity to Internet Users” (*News-Leader*);and “Can We Become Caught in the Web?” (Szalavitz).

psychological well-being. The panel research design gives us substantial leverage in inferring causation, leading us to believe that in this case, correlation does indeed imply causation”(1028).

If the Carnegie Mellon researchers are correct, what explains the fact that Internet use causes declines in social involvement and psychological wellbeing? One explanation begins with the premise that time is always and already full. In practical terms, this means that to do one thing is to displace another. Thus, Internet use, one might argue, displaces time people might otherwise devote to social purposes. A study conducted at the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society lends weight to this explanation (Nie and Erbring). The Stanford research team, which considered the social consequences of Internet use based on a large, representative sample of Americans (including both Internet users and non-users), found that as Internet use increases, people spend less time with friends and family. In the words of Norman Nie, the principal investigator, “The more hours people use the Internet, the less time they spend with real human beings” (O’Toole). Fully one quarter of the study’s polling respondents who used the Internet regularly (more than five hours a week) reported that using the Internet had reduced their time with friends and family or had detracted from other social events outside the home. Among Internet users who were employed, one quarter reported that the Internet increased the time they spent working at home without cutting back at the office. Those least affected in their day-to-day social interactions were people who used the Internet less than five hours per week; those most affected spent more than ten hours per week surfing the Net. In an interview on PBS’s NewsHour, Nie offered this summary: “I think the big story is that . . . the time you spend on the Internet is time that comes out of friends and family and social activity and goes into work and into spending time by yourself on the Internet.” Also, “With the growth of bandwidth, we’ll move from a state of billboards and print and rough graphics to a true multimedia. And I think we have the beginning evidence that people are going to spend a lot of time on it and that

ultimately . . . I think one has to be concerned about . . . the sheer reduction in amount of real social interaction” (“Internet Disconnect” 2, 3).

Displacement is not exclusively a temporal phenomenon; it can be spatial as well. William J. Mitchell, dean of the school of architecture at MIT, has described a kind of spatial displacement that takes place in cyberspace, the digital sphere where “you get from place to place . . . by following logical links rather than physical paths” (23). The new categories of cyberspace, according to Mitchell, “will turn classical categories inside out and will reconstruct the discourse in which architects have engaged from classical times until now” (24) From these new categories, Mitchell predicts, a new virtual-city will emerge.

This will be a city unrooted to any definite spot on the surface of the earth, shaped by connectivity and bandwidth constraints rather than by accessibility and land values, largely asynchronous in its operation, and inhabited by disembodied and fragmented subjects who exist as collections of aliases and agents. Its place will be constructed virtually by software instead of physically from stones and timbers, and they will be connected by logical linkages rather than by doors, passageways, and streets (24).

The homogeneous virtual-city that Mitchell describes here is neither a place nor a dwelling, but a City of Bits, whose citizens are cyborgs.²³ Certainly, it bears only faint

²³One of the twentieth century’s seminal short works on dwelling is Martin Heidegger’s essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” The term ‘cyborg’ derives from “cybernetic organism” and applies to artificial and augmented bodies animated by human intelligence. For a fuller discussion of cyborgs, see Mitchell (182) and O’Leary and Brasher (254,255). Paul Levenson suggests that the new media lead us to exchange a sense of location and place for an abstract and undifferentiated notion of spatiality and leave us disembodied. “When we are on the Net, we become illustrative of another of McLuhan’s concepts. We become virtual – or, in McLuhan’s vocabulary, ‘discarnate’ – meaning that, in cyberspace, our physical bodies play no role in our relationships. We might say that, on line, everybody is nobody. McLuhan noted the discarnate effect of, for instance, talking on the phone, and he wondered what impact the effect has on our morality. The on-line participant is incorporeal in the same interactive way as the person on the phone. Cyber sex, like phone sex, entails no physical risks, but on line we can be angels or devils. Romeos or Mata Haris. No wonder pornography is the best-selling business on the Internet. The Internet liberates not only prior media, but also our libidos” (B11).

resemblance to the homes or places of worship in which traditional Bible study once flourished, though it has the potential (and in certain respects has already begun) to displace them.

Of course if, as the Carnegie Mellon study shows, the most prevalent home use of the Internet is for social purposes, then the displacement explanation, whether temporal or spatial, only partially illuminates the apparent causal connection between Internet use and declines in social involvement and psychological well-being. For if people use the Internet at home primarily for social purposes then, generally speaking, when they exchange face-to-face social arrangements in real-world places for online social arrangements in the City of Bits they still remain socially engaged, and we should not expect a causal connection between Internet use and declines in social involvement and psychological well-being.

A more searching explanation might well have more to do with the *kinds* of social relationships the Internet encourages and sustains than with the mere fact that the Internet isolates people from what Nie calls “real human beings.” In other words, even though in their homes people use the Internet primarily for social purposes, the nature of the social relationships they find there may not be of the same quality as the face-to-face relationships displaced by going online. Put another way, displacement may be the key issue, but not quite in the way initially suggested. Thus whether or not face-to-face social relationships get displaced by the Internet may be an important concern, but the more fundamental concern is whether a certain kind of social relationship commonly found in face-to-face relationships gets displaced by another kind of relationship more prevalent online.

This line of explanation can be developed in terms of a distinction between *strong* and *weak* social ties. Strong social ties are associated with relationships in which people have frequent contact with each other, exhibit deep feelings of affection and obligation, and communicate on a broad range of substantive issues. Where social ties are weak,

people have infrequent contact, their social bonds are superficial and easily broken, and they communicate about relatively few substantive issues. Both kinds of ties are useful. Weak social ties, for example, are useful in providing access to information and social resources not readily available in other ways (Granovetter; Constant et al.). But strong social ties are the ones most likely to provide people the support they need to cope with life's important issues and challenges (Cohen and Wills; Krackhardt). Drawing on this distinction between strong and weak social ties, Kraut and his colleagues venture the following explanation: "Perhaps, by using the Internet, people are substituting poorer quality social relationships for better relationships, that is, substituting weak ties for strong ones" (1029).

This explanation is consistent with the major findings in their study. For example, their research shows that people can sustain strong ties electronically. (Interviews revealed examples of people staying in contact with family members and friends living in remote locations.) However, many online relationships, especially new ones, exemplify weak ties rather than strong ones. (Examples from the study included a man who exchanged jokes and Scottish trivia with a person he met through an online tourist web site and an adolescent who disseminated fictional stories about his underwater exploits to other members of a scuba diving chat service.) Also, making friends online is rare, but even when such friendships do develop they do not counteract overall declines in real-world communication with family and friends (1029). Online friendships, moreover, are likely to be more limited than friendships developed in physical proximity, meaning that (compared to friends developed at school, work, church, or in the neighborhood) online friends are less likely to be willing or able to provide assistance with tasks or comfort in difficult times. Even when people try to maintain strong ties by means of digital technology such as e-mail, the nature of the relationship is likely to be different in kind, perhaps even diminished in strength, compared with strong ties supported by physical proximity. In sum: "The interpersonal communication applications currently prevalent on

the Internet are either neutral toward strong ties or tend to undercut rather than promote them” (1030).

If the findings of the Carnegie Mellon and Stanford studies hold up in the long run, the prospects seem dim for developing forms of digitally based Bible study capable of sustaining complex and thickly textured faith communities of the sort that functioned as vibrant social institutions in the past. Even in cases where Internet users enter cyberspace with no intention of maintaining their anonymity²⁴ – that is to say, even when they purposefully reach out to other people in order to discuss sacred texts and to communicate candidly and intimately about matters of faith – their efforts are likely to prove unsatisfying in the long run unless they are undergirded and sustained by a network of real-world social relationships. At best, it seems, cyberspace relationships can augment real world relationships, and this in a limited way under special conditions.

CONCLUSION

It strikes me that from the preceding discussion two challenges emerge: The first is to reinvigorate the study of the Bible and to do so in a way that makes it a central community activity among people of faith; the second is to find an appropriate role for the new media to perform in meeting the first challenge. Part of the difficulty in meeting the first challenge is that the Bible, like the preponderance of documents in the print medium, lacks glamour by comparison to contemporary digital products. In the age of new media, in which colorful surfaces seem to count for more than ideas, the printed Bible is gradually being relegated to the hall desk drawer or the lower shelf of the living room lamp table. Proponents of digital technology, of course, have made breath-taking promises. New media resources, we hear, will revolutionize Bible study by making

²⁴It cannot be assumed that most or even many people generally go online with the presumption that they will disclose themselves to others in any significant or personal way. Richard Seltzer, for example, believes that anonymity is one of the things that attracts people to the Internet (chp 7).

information and resources available of which earlier generations could only dream. Moreover, they will transform and revitalize community life through the formation of online communities tailored to the needs of specific audiences. But as we have seen, these promises have not yet been met, and this through no lack of effort. It is certainly true that the general public and scholars alike have benefited from the information revolution and that the computer can be a uniquely powerful tool. However, the much welcomed proliferation of digital Bible study resources has so far led neither to increased reading of the Bible among the general public nor to increased overall understanding of its content. For many people, the overall increase in digital data does seem to have had the unintended side effect of blurring the distinction between the act of gathering information and the process of reflectively, contextually making sense of information. (As pointed out earlier, exposure to data is not a sufficient condition for understanding.) Furthermore, preliminary evidence seems to suggest that Internet use is causally connected with declines in social involvement – hardly an auspicious finding for a medium whose primary home use is said to be for social purposes.

Meeting the first challenge cannot involve assuming the posture of a Luddite. It is neither possible nor desirable either to do away with the new media or to retreat to a time when information was less available. Digital media and digital information alike should be accepted affirmatively and incorporated into the life of contemporary faith communities deliberately, intelligently, and realistically. This requires in the first instance establishing clear priorities. The new media, for all their wonder, should be strictly limited to a supporting role. On the spectrum of means, ends, and ultimate ends, digital technology is often treated as if it were an end in itself, and in some quarters studying the Bible is treated as if it were merely an occasion for the development of sophisticated digital Bible study resources. Community formation, too, is sometimes treated not as an end having merit in its own right but as a problem to be solved technologically (Werry and Mowbray; Preece; Kim). From this perspective, demonstrating that an online

community can indeed be established (regardless of how minimal or attenuated it may be) then becomes a reason to celebrate the hardware and software that made it possible. But establishing priorities of the sort I have in mind entails reversing this order. It means placing Bible study and faith community formation in the position of ends eminently worthy of pursuit and relocating the new media to the unmistakable position of means.

Establishing clear priorities in this way (perhaps it is now evident that from an historical perspective the proper expression should be ‘re-establishing priorities’) offers the possibility both of renewing our appreciation for Bible study as a rewarding activity in its own right and of delighting in the remarkable liberty and facility that digital technology make possible. Thus, for example, earnestly and deliberately studying a passage in the Bible is a practice of intellectual engagement that has the effect of deepening one’s admiration for the way the new media can make available a remarkable array of relevant study resources. In the context of sustained effort to understand the text, digital study resources would surely be gratefully welcomed. Certainly they could not be spoken of in the casual, almost dismissive way my student spoke about her new Bible study software.²⁵ Similarly, engaging in a serious discussion of a biblical passage with family members or friends, attentively attending to interpretations advanced by scholars, or reflectively considering the text’s moral or spiritual implications in light of a pastor’s well-crafted sermon are the kinds of disciplined focus of attention that might well lead one to appreciate more fully the technological wonder of being able to confer via e-mail about the same passage with a friend in another city or revel in the fun and intellectual stimulation of discussing the text with strangers in an Internet chat room.

Establishing priorities in the relationship between the practice of studying the Bible and the digital technology that facilitates that practice implies that this relationship can never be strictly symmetrical and equal. One is always primary, the other secondary.

²⁵But neither could they be legitimately viewed as “short-cuts” or “replacements” for the disciplined activity of study.

One is always the end for which the other is the means. Stated more concretely, disciplined engagement with the biblical text, particularly within a community setting, is eminently worthy of our full effort. The new media at their best support and facilitate that end. We should, therefore, measure these media (both the resources they provide and their potential for transforming community life) by one standard: whether they encourage sustained engagement with the biblical text. In the words of Albert Borgmann, “The task, it would seem, is a matter of commensurating the fluidity of information technology with the stability of the things and practices that have served us well and we continue to depend on for our material and spiritual well-being What is needed is a sense for the liabilities of technological information and an ear for the changing voices of traditional reality” (*Holding On* 210). Certainly it would be a calamity to be deprived instantly of all digital Bible study resources. But the perfection of these resources is a penultimate achievement at best. And their perfection will count for little if at the end of the day the earnest study of the Bible itself ceases to be a central, sustaining, and orienting activity in our lives.²⁶

²⁶ I wish to thank my colleague Gary Liddle for reading and commenting on this essay.

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Complete computer history that happened in 2004 including the introduction of Gmail and Thefacebook that later became Facebook. Major computer events in 2004. Other computer events in 2004. New computer products and services introduced in 2004. Computer companies and organizations founded in 2004. Computer company events in 2004. Computer pioneer deaths in 2004. Major computer events in 2004. Mark Zuckerberg launched Thefacebook on February 4, 2004, which later became Facebook. 2004 Election Facts. Kerry won Minnesota; however one elector cast a vote for Dem. Vice-President candidate John Edwards. Electoral Vote changes for 2004 based on 2000 Census: [+2: AZ, FL, GA, TX], [+1: CA, CO, NV, NC], [-1: CT, IL, IN, MI, MS, OH, OK, WI], [-2: NY, PA]. Issues of the Day: Terrorism, Iraq War, Job growth. Margin of Victory Map. 2004. Nissan Note is First Produced. The Nissan Note (kana:æ— ¥ç”£ãf»ãfŽãf¼ãf”) is a mini MPV produced by the Japanese manufacturer Nissan. The Japanese version has been on sale since 2004, and the Read more. 2004. Nissan Lafesta is First Produced. In 2004, Vick was named to his second Pro Bowl after starting 15 games, completing 181 of 321 passes for 2,313 yards with 14 touchdowns and 12 Read more. 2004. Miley Auditions for Hannah Montana. 2004 history from the new millennium including Cost Of Living, Pop Culture, News Events and Technology. 2004. News, Events, Technology, Prices and Popular Culture. The People History Home - 2000 , , 2001 , 2002 , 2003 , , 2004, 2005 2006, 2007, 2008, , 2009, , 2010, , 2011, 2012, 2013, - Millennium Home.

2004 (MMIV) was a leap year starting on Thursday of the Gregorian calendar, the 2004th year of the Common Era (CE) and Anno Domini (AD) designations, the 4th year of the 3rd millennium, the 4th year of the 21st century, and the 5th year of the 2000s decade. 2004 was designated as the International Year of Rice (by the United Nations) and the International Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition (by UNESCO).