

COMMUNICATING THE #GOSPEL MESSAGE WITHIN A POST-POSTMODERN, DIGITALLY CONNECTED CULTURE

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Tweetable Abstract

If a #postpostmodern culture communicates differently w/ #digitalmedia shouldn't the #church proclaim the #gospel in a way it understands? <http://ow.ly/o2lZj>

Fuller Abstract

Postmodernism is dead or at best dying and has been replaced by a new cultural paradigm claims many philosophers, writers, and art critics. Though there are many philosophies and theories on the nature of this new cultural paradigm, it appears that whatever is coming after postmodernism is largely being defined by global advances in technology and the increased interaction of people via digital media. Central to the philosophy and worldview of any cultural paradigm is a search for truth and how that truth needs to be appropriately communicated. The ways in which truth and meaning are understood and communicated evolve from one cultural paradigm to another; and the roles of the author, text, and recipient likewise change to fit the new form of communication. Much has been written about contextualizing the gospel story for a modern and postmodern culture, but very little has been written about contextualizing the message and meaning of the gospel story for a post-postmodern, digital culture.

In this paper I examine the nature of the author, text, and recipient in post-postmodern communication and seek a contextually appropriate way of communicating the gospel in a digital culture. I believe the gospel metanarrative is relevant to any cultural paradigm and provides the purpose and meaning that a restless, passionate, digitally connected, 21st century next gen person is searching to live for. To lead this generation through this shift in cultural paradigms, the church must learn to effectively communicate the gospel message for this culture in contextually appropriate ways. I do not seek in this paper to provide a definitive answer on what exactly post-postmodernism is or will become (time will tell and philosophers will write). I do, however, intend to show how the digitization of text and the global interaction of people via digital media forms have immensely impacted our post-postmodern culture, and therefore demands that the church respond by communicating the gospel in a contextually appropriate manner.

“[P]ostmodernism is dead and buried. In its place comes a new paradigm of authority and knowledge formed under the pressure of new technologies and contemporary social forces” reads the subtitle of an article by Alan Kirby, writer and researcher in 20th century literature and culture.¹ Postmodernism has been replaced as the dominant philosophy by a post-postmodernism that some cultural analysts would say is being defined by new technologies and the impact of a digital, global world. Web 2.0, interactive digital media, and ever evolving smart technology devices have redefined how people create, interact, communicate, and influence others thereby shaping our current cultural paradigm. With this shift in dominant cultural forces, how should the church contextualize communicating the gospel for this post-postmodern, digital culture? To answer the questions of why and how the Church must communicate a contextually appropriate gospel to a post-postmodern society, one must examine and interact with the post-postmodern cultural shift particularly in regards to its effects on how people learn and communicate. By communicating the gospel message in ways that are better understood and easily shareable in a digitized post-postmodern culture, the Church will be more effective in communicating the gospel message and making disciples of all cultures.

Key Terms

Paradigm shifts occur when the dominant cultural landscape changes whether through gradual growth or radical shifting.² When a cultural paradigm shifts (such as from Modernity to Postmodernity), the worldview of the specific culture changes out of a reaction to the current,

¹ Reads the description of Alan Kirby’s article "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond." *Philosophy Now*, no. 58 (November/December 2006). http://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond. Accessed September 02, 2012.

² Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 316.

dominant cultural landscape. Some cultural paradigms discussed in this paper are Modernism (19th century to 1940s), Postmodernism (1950s to 1990s), and Post-Postmodernism (2000s to present).³

Modernism, as a cultural paradigm, developed from the pursuit of objective truth through reason.⁴ Through inductive study, the modernist sought “a knowledge that is absolutely and universally felt to be true,”⁵ and human reason became the tool to do such. Absolute truth could be completely understood and universally expressed by all.

Postmodernism developed as a cultural paradigm in the middle of the twentieth century as a response to modernism’s claim of universal truths. Robert Greer notes “Scholars could not agree on what constituted universal truth”⁶ so instead “[argued] for a more localized understanding of truth.”⁷ The postmodern thought is that absolute truth cannot be knowable since truth is distinctly relative to a specific language or context.⁸

Post-postmodernism as a cultural paradigm has developed mostly during the last decade alongside the advances in technology that have radically shaped how people learn and communicate in this globally interactive society. Philosophically, post-postmodernism is a reaction to the despair of not being able to know truth as absolute and the unanswered questions left in the wake of postmodernism.⁹ While many philosophers and authors contend that postmodernism is dead or dying, a unified consensus describing what is developing after postmodernism has yet to be clearly defined. Many philosophies and terms describing the post-

³ The dates are not exact since cultural paradigms overlap as different people within a culture have varying worldviews. These time frames represent the average dates mentioned by many authors.

⁴ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 142.

⁵ Robert Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 223.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 241.

postmodern shift center around either recent advances in technology or a philosophical meaninglessness left in the wake of postmodernism.¹⁰ For the purposes of this thesis, no single philosophy of post-postmodernism will be defended as the final answer to this new cultural shift, but treatment will be given to the interplay of the digitization of culture with this shifting.

Globalization is the phenomenon of the whole world being connected economically, technologically, politically, and socially.¹¹ Much discussion surrounding post-postmodernism includes talk of globalization since technology has only enhanced the connectedness of the world. One of the key elements of globalization and its rapid development is “the movement of people and information around the world at an ever-increasing speed.”¹² Tethered to the idea of globalization is the term *glocal*, which looks specifically at “the seamless integration between the local and global.”¹³ Glocalization describes how people are now living their everyday lives and connecting with others via a local and global context simultaneously since the world is now globalized.¹⁴

Intertextuality, as defined by Merriam-Webster.com, is “the complex interrelationship between a text and other texts taken as basic to the creation or interpretation of the text.”¹⁵ Digitally speaking, intertextuality extends to the interrelationship between the text and the recipient’s interaction with the text in the search for meaning.

¹⁰ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism." *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* no. 2 (2010), under “History Beyond ‘The End of History’, Art Beyond ‘The End of Art’” doi:10.3402/jac.v1i0.5677. See also Appendix 1 for more terms naming the post-postmodern cultural landscape.

¹¹ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 242.

¹² *Ibid.*, 243.

¹³ Bob Roberts, *Glocalization: How Followers of Jesus Engage the New Flat World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

The Need for the Church to Stay Current with New Cultural Paradigms

It is jokingly said that the North American or Western Church seems to stay at least 20 years behind the current culture, forcing it to always play "catch up" in its dress, practices, and beliefs within its changing culture.¹⁶ Instead, the Church ought to be in the forefront, missionally leading the culture as it changes. Briefly surveying the publication dates of some recent literature analyzing the Postmodern cultural paradigm and the Church's response to it shows that Christian scholars are still trying to engage postmodernity, even though it is considered dead or at least fading.¹⁷

Postmodernism introduced itself around the 1950s and has dominated Western cultures including the United States, on philosophical, anthropological, political, and even theological levels. The Church in the West has sought to contextualize the gospel message and the definition of Christian community in order to react and respond to a postmodern worldview, but has often found itself desperately trying various means of reaching the postmodern yet producing little results. The Church struggles with relevantly communicating the absolute truth of the gospel in a postmodern culture since postmodernism seeks to redefine the meaning of a text and the intent of the author, creating a subjective rather than objective meaning of truth.

The postmodern idea of subjective truth radically redefines how people learn and communicate since "meaning" is determined by the community discussing it rather than by the intent of the original author. This pluralistic view of communication and meaning prompted the Church to formulate answers for engaging postmoderns with a subjective gospel message. The

¹⁵ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Accessed November 12, 2012. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intertextuality>.

¹⁶ Alan Nelson, "Ministry in 2018: 12 Trends Affecting You Now." *Rev.org* (January/February 2008), <http://www.rev.org/article.asp?ID=2820> (Accessed October 21, 2012).

¹⁷ All ten of the sources used in research for this paper that specifically deal with ministry to a postmodern cultural paradigm were published within the last ten years (the age of post-postmodernity) while only two sources could be easily found dealing with ministry in a post-postmodern cultural paradigm.

emergence of the emergent church shows that portions of the Church have attempted to stay culturally relevant with postmoderns, yet have often sacrificed doctrine on the altar of the open conversation, leaving essential truths of the gospel message open to anyone's interpretation.¹⁸

The last decade has seen numerous books and articles on ministry in a postmodern culture that were meant to equip Christian pastors, leaders, teachers, and laymen to be able to appropriately engage a postmodern worldview. These resources are extremely beneficial and relevant to those doing ministry in a postmodern setting, but postmodernity is a product of the 1950s-1990s, not the 2000s or 2010s. The Church should not be content with merely reacting to a shift in culture but must learn to lead the evolving culture through its changes. To avoid falling behind the cultural shifts happening in America, the western church must learn to faithfully contextualize the gospel message for a post-postmodern audience. As the gospel is contextually proclaimed with clarity and power, societies will be permeated with followers of Jesus who will missionally engage their culture in order to multiply worshipers of God. Staying well-informed of evolving learning styles and methods of communication in a post-postmodern culture equips the church to effectively proclaim the gospel message in a culturally appropriate manner.

The message of God's redemption of mankind has always been communicated to people in ways they understood, using technologies that were relevant and available. God spoke gospel truths to Adam and Eve as he walked with them in the Garden of Eden before stone tablets or papyrus was needed. The Ten Commandments were given to Israel written on stone tablets to preserve God's standards for his people. King David put the gospel into lyrics and wrote them on parchment or animal skin so Israel could sing together of the mercy and goodness of Israel's God. Jesus used the relevant teaching method of parables to challenge the Scribes and Pharisee's

¹⁸ Many in the emergent church are criticized for questioning key doctrines such as the atonement, reality of hell, and the virgin birth.

understanding of the Old Testament scrolls that told them of his coming. Paul debated with scholars using rhetorical methods of communication to illumine the minds of the academia of the Roman Empire.

The book of Acts shows how the gospel spread along the advanced Roman Roads to all corners of the known world. For centuries, monks copied the text of Scripture into scrolls to preserve the gospel message for future generations. Guttenberg used his printing press to print copies of the Bible faster than any monk, and missionaries were able to carry copies of God's word to distribute all over the world. The telegraph gave speed to quick communication, and the radio brought live gospel proclamation into the homes of millions. Television and movies brought the stage to a person's living room as actors communicated their message, using the senses of both sound and sight.

The Internet has given disciple-making a new version of the Roman road system by digitally connecting anyone who has access to the Internet with people and resources. Social media has connected billions of people with others for gospel community, networking, resourcing, and proclaiming. In shorter words, God has always incorporated the use of current technologies available so his people joining him in his mission could effectively communicate the gospel message. Therefore, it is imperative that Christians not only understand how to practically use current technologies but to use them to effectively contextualize and communicate the gospel of Jesus.

Analysis of Truth within the Various Cultural Paradigms

Since the gospel message must be contextualized for each cultural paradigm, a proclaimer of truth must analyze the nature of the author, text, and recipient within the paradigms of modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism. The "author" is the figure

that is producing the original information or truth and is responsible for the meaning of the text. The “text” is the words, figures, or ideas in various forms that are produced to present the information to the recipient. The author studies and produces the “truth” and presents this truth via printed, audible, or visual forms of media. The “recipient” is the person or group (no matter the size) that is intended to receive the text for gaining meaning and knowledge. The recipient interacts with the text in some way and responds to the author based on the truth conveyed in the text.¹⁹ Analyzing the progression of how truth is viewed from modernity, to postmodernity, to now post-postmodernity will aid in understanding how post-postmoderns learn and communicate in their digital environments.

Modernity. The age of modernity ushered in an era of believing that absolute, universal truths did exist, and those truths could be rationally studied and reasonably understood by the individual. Modernism sought to radically question everything in order to arise at a universal truth free of cultural bias, and this “radical doubt” cleared the mind of the inquirer so that only the pure truth would be deduced. The human mind is thus elevated as the individual becomes the interpreter and producer of truth.²⁰ James K. A. Smith aptly notes that this emphasis on the individual as the source of truth affected Christianity by making the individual the base “ingredient” of the church thereby defining the church “simply as a collection of individuals.”²¹

The author was seen as the one with authority behind producing a text and the individual became “the arbiter of truth.”²² If the author’s argument was logical, reasonable, and well-studied, the information he conveyed was generally believed as truth. The text the author

¹⁹ Discussion of truth being seen from the interaction of the author, text, and recipient was adapted from David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 48-53.

²⁰ Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 222-223.

²¹ James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (The Church and Postmodern Culture. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 29.

produced was static in form—usually through written words in a book or spoken words in lecture format—and was presented so that the recipient would receive the information, believe it, and react through applying its implications. For example, in a church gathering, the pastor presents a text (monologue sermon), and the recipients hear and understand the spoken text. The recipients could then interact with the text (sermon) presented by the author (pastor) by responding in belief that leads to action. In modernism, the recipient of a text interacts with the text individually through their mind and physically with their reactions.

Postmodernity. Around the mid-20th century, the idea of absolute truth began to be questioned, and truth became relative to the individual in the context of a group within a specific context. Postmodern truth is grounded in the language and culture of the one seeking a truth, not by any universal “metanarrative (megatruth)...from which all other truths are organized [and] [serve] as the final arbitrator of right and wrong.”²³ Therefore, postmodernism grounds truth in the local narratives that form out of the differing perspectives of the different cultures, religions, or ideologies of the person or group. Since these local narratives (truths) are now equally valid, “Local and marginal narratives must be encouraged and heard.”²⁴ Robert Greer notes how this should be of concern for Christianity since, “Postmodernism renders absolute truth a fiction and replaces it with the less authoritative notion of points of view, opinions, and impressions.”²⁵

Similar to modernity, the author in postmodernity still presents the truth for the recipient. In postmodernity, there are multiple authors contributing their version of the same truth that they processed through the lens of their local context and language. By making truth objective instead

²² Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 148.

²³ Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism*, 220.

²⁴ Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 221.

²⁵ Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism*, 228.

of subjective, the meaning of a text could be determined by having an inquiring conversation with anyone wishing to participate. As Greer points out,

For the postmodernist...the goal of inquiry is not a uniform understanding of knowledge (a metanarrative or megatruth) but an appreciation of differing systems of thought (an endeavor which, at times, includes the modification of one's own system) without pursuing a metanarrative."²⁶

The recipient(s) of the text is in a position to take away a version of the truth that best fits their local context while at the same time agreeing that another recipient's take-away truth was just as viable. This idea of truth led to religious pluralism where all faith systems could lead to the same conclusion, and a person only needed to decide which path they wanted to take to spiritual fulfillment. Samir Selmanovic represents how the emergent church movement has embraced this pluralistic understanding of truth. His chapter on "finding our God in the other" in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* alarmingly concludes that Christianity's texts are not the only bearers of the gospel, that salvation can be found outside of Christianity's teaching, and that any religion that produces people living a gracious life is welcomed at God's table.²⁷

Post-Postmodernity. The currently developing cultural paradigm of post-postmodernism attempts to compromise and fulfill questions left from modernity and postmodernity. While modernity seeks universal truths or grand narratives and postmodernity seeks relative truth and localized narratives, post-postmodernism seeks to hold both grand and local narratives in tension, seeing the validity of each in order to find truth. Postmodernism sought to eradicate modernism's idea of particular, universal truth by pitting it against a pluralistic truth that fits a broader panorama of worldviews. It is in the midst of this truth-war that a unifying view emerges that

²⁶ Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism*, 226.

²⁷ Samir Selmanovic, "The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness" in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. by Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 189-195.

seeks to hold both modernism's particular truth and postmodernism's plurality of truth in a healthy tension. Greer, in *Mapping Postmodernism*, explains the post-postmodern shift as a hybrid paradigm that is "both particularistic and pluralistic" and favors a "Trinitarian, or paradoxical, understanding of absolute truth."²⁸

Kirby calls the current post-postmodern paradigm "digimodernism" saying, "It owes its emergence and preeminence to the computerization of text, which yields a new form of textuality characterized in its purest instances by onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship."²⁹ Because of digital technology, the text in a post-postmodern culture is now more interactive than ever. Kirby explains the interactive nature of text by saying, "The digimodernist text in its pure form is made up to a varying degree by the reader or viewer or textual consumer. This figure becomes authorial in this sense: s/he makes text where none existed before...such a reader or viewer gives to the world textual content or shapes the development and progress of a text in visible form."³⁰ One example of a popular "text" form in post-postmodernism is the SMS or text message. The conversation between multiple authors via text messaging "exists culturally in the act of creation more than in finished form" unlike the static finished texts of modernism and postmodernism.³¹

As Kirby notes, the recipient of the "digimodern" text (whether a blog, comment to a post, or text message) to some extent becomes the partial or whole author of the text. Therefore, anyone with Internet access can become part of the authorship of a text by either interacting with

²⁸ Selmanovic, "The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness", 206.

²⁹ Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

a preexisting text or by framing a text that is open for discussion by anyone else.³² The author evolves from being the giver of objective truth (modernism) or the conversation starter of relative truth (postmodernism) to the conglomerate social network of people interacting with the text. In post-postmodern digital text, authorship is always plural and exists in a structured hierarchy of the primary framer of the text who sets the rules of interaction for the secondary author who comments on the text.³³ The “digimodern” text is brought into being by a plurality of anonymous authors interacting with a text forming authorship into “the site of a swarming, restless creativity and energy.”³⁴ This new view of the author, text, and recipient easily opens the path for seeing truth as existing in tension between the particular—the individual’s contribution of their view of the grand truth in discussion—and the pluralistic—the relative views of local truths being contributed by the culturally diverse social network.

The mindset of this new cultural paradigm and its understanding of truth raises many questions that the Church must understand and address. Like the other paradigms of modernism and postmodernism, post-postmodernism brings unique challenges and advantages that the Church must contextually grapple with in order to lead the culture through its shifting in real-time. Furthermore, gospel mission and proclamation to a post-postmodern cultural paradigm *must be* driven by the absolute truth of the Gospel metanarrative (reflecting modernism) and be contextually understood by every local narrative (reflecting postmodernism). The post-postmodern landscape provides fertile ground for reproducing healthy disciples of Jesus since people are now more connected with each other and to the readily available gospel message.

³² Alan Kirby, "The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond" *Philosophy Now* no. 58 (November/December 2006), under “What’s Post-Postmodernism,” http://philosophynow.org/issues/58/The_Death_of_Postmodernism_And_Beyond (accessed September 02, 2012).

³³ Kirby, *Digimodernism* 59.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

Gospel Contextualization and Post-Postmodern Communication Theory

Charles Kraft explains in *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* that there are three methods that people use to communicate with each other.³⁵ In public announcements for larger groups, the preferred method is monologue. Dialogue or discussion is best for small groups of people where several can contribute to the conversation. The last method Kraft mentions is life involvement, which he says is better suited for very small groups and individuals.³⁶ These three methods are fairly unchanging throughout the modern and postmodern eras. In regards to proclaiming the gospel and teaching Scripture, the approach in the modern era focused more on the monologue. It was this era that viewed the pulpit as authoritative and truth was well received by the recipients listening. The postmodern era encouraged people of different, local contexts to converse on a particular text (whether spoken or written) reflecting Kraft's communication method of dialogue. Many postmodern Christian movements and groups use phrases like "join the conversation" to invite participants into a dialogue about theology where the authority lies in what is discussed and taken away by each individual.

Though Kraft is correct in his analysis of communication as the "coordination between the goal of the communicator, the content of the message, contextual factors, and the kind and use of the methods employed," the Church must learn to contextualize the gospel message for a society that can interact with a text in a way not thought of in the early 1990s.³⁷ Since the way communication happens within a post-postmodern cultural setting is digital, interactive, and multifaceted, the post-postmodern Church must begin rethinking the way the gospel is proclaimed to a post-postmodern audience. Tim Challies, in his book *The Next Story*, examines how communication has changed in a digitally saturated culture and shows communication is

³⁵ Charles H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

still the tie that binds everyone together—even with the plethora of devices now used to communicate.³⁸ Contextualizing communication of the gospel has been necessary for all of time and especially in our current cultural paradigm. Anyone can Google the source or content of the message, critique it on a blog, “retweet” it for many more to interact with, or post a viral video of the message that may communicate the message better than the original author.

In speaking of preaching the right gospel in the right way, Bruce Ashford, professor of theology and culture at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, exhorts Christians to preach the gospel “faithfully by remaining true to the authorial intent of the biblical writers and meaningfully by communicating in such a way that the audience understands our message in the way we intend it.”³⁹ In a post-postmodern culture, the metanarrative of the gospel story must be contextualized for an audience that is used to becoming interactive with the text whereby they become one of many authors. It will help to see how to best contextualize the gospel for this new cultural paradigm by examining the ways in which certain defining communication characteristics of post-postmodernism intersect with the foundations of communication. The communication characteristics of post-postmodernism to be examined are as follows: digital text as a new form of textuality, the glocalization of social networks, and interactivity in learning and communication. Explaining these will show the resulting effects of post-postmodernism on the individual’s worldview and communication.

³⁷ Ibid., 61.

³⁸ Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 69.

³⁹ Bruce Riley Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2011), 306.

Digital Text as New Form of Textuality

Alan Kirby's description of post-postmodernism as "digimodernism" aptly shows how the digital age has significantly changed the current cultural paradigm from postmodernism to post-postmodernism. Kirby says, "The most immediate way, however, of describing digimodernism is this: it's a new form of textuality."⁴⁰ This new form of textuality alters how truth is understood and communicated through the role of the author, text, and the recipient as noted above due to the interactive nature of "digimodern" texts. The invention of the Internet brought a plethora of information to anyone with access. Internet web pages began as read-only texts and existed to provide the recipient with a text that conveyed information. As technology evolved, the idea of a web page evolved into what is known as Web 2.0.

"Web 2.0, as it is used today, refers to a second generation of internet-based services (information and applications) that are open for collaboration and high levels of interactivity without requiring computer programming skills" says Jim Macnamara, professor of public communication at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.⁴¹ With Web 2.0, web pages become interactive forms of text that encourage user participation beyond just simply receiving information.

"The forms of Web 2.0 are the most globally important cultural development of the twenty-first century so far, and they lie at the heart of digimodernism as we currently know it" says Kirby.⁴² Chat rooms create pseudo-identities for people. Blogs are open journals for anyone to interact with, and a blog posts' longevity depends on the continual interaction of the readership. *Wikipedia* provides an interactive encyclopedia that invites recipients to be both

⁴⁰ Kirby, *Digimodernism*, 50.

⁴¹ Jim Macnamara, *The 21st Century Media (r)evolution: Emergent Communication Practices* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 33.

⁴² Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism*, 101.

receivers and producers (postmodernistic) of an understood absolute truth (modernistic). *YouTube* has elevated the common person with some sort of video recording device to prominence, and the produced video is up for interaction and discussion via comments and social media sharing. *Facebook* seeks to mimic friendship by creating communities of people (social networks) that communicate and interact only through digital forms of text.⁴³ This rise of social media through Web 2.0 forms increased the demand for interactivity among people, leading to increasing desire for customization. Tim Challies explains this need for customization saying, “The user experience had to be customized so that we could build a presence that would reflect our interests and our passions—that would somehow become a part of our very identity.”⁴⁴ This form of communication shapes the post-postmodern’s identity as he anticipates interaction from those within his social network through the moment-by-moment breakdown of his day via *Facebook* status updates or *Twitter* posts.

If the idea of the text and the recipient’s interaction with it has changed so much, how then could a post-postmodern person interact with a static text such as the Bible? For Christians to contextualize the gospel story written in a static text, they must first be interacting with the text of Scripture themselves. A relationship with Jesus cannot be developed by mere intellectual knowledge of Jesus and the gospel story. All relationships involve interaction between two parties, and a relationship with Jesus grows from interaction with the written Scriptures. The first chapter of John’s Gospel presents Jesus as the eternal Word who incarnated Himself so that mankind could interact with Him relationally. The post-postmodern must come to see Jesus as the intertextual Word that involves a relationship with the text far deeper than commenting and

⁴³ Ibid., 105-123.

⁴⁴ Challies, *The next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 71.

communal discussion. Interaction with the Word involves the person into the text of the story of the gospel.

Once a person interacts with the ever-living Word that fosters a deep relationship with Jesus, that person can then transfer the relational, living Word of Scripture to the digital texts they interact with. This must involve deeper “digimodern” textual interaction beyond posting a Bible verse every now and then onto one’s social media platform. The post-postmodern Christian can now share, discuss, proclaim, and involve a diverse social network of people into the depths of the gospel story through the various Web 2.0 forms. While the actual text and interpretation of Scripture cannot be changed by anyone, the recipient does digitally, mentally, and physically interact with the message of Scripture as he submits his life to the implications found in the text. At this point of obedience, the post-postmodern Christian becomes the co-author not of the text of Scripture (the story of God’s mission to redeem his creation) but of his life’s text (his personal story within the mission of God) under the hierarchical authorship of *the* “Author and finisher” of our faith. God invites humanity into being a part of the ultimate text (metanarrative of the gospel story) by restoring the recipients to their original position within the ultimate text. If Tim Challies is correct when he says that “Social media and mobility perfectly complement one another, giving us the desire and the ability to communicate at all times, in all places, in all contexts,” then the Christian must integrate their activity in God’s story with those in their social networks through social media and digital texts.⁴⁵

Glocal Social Networks

Post-postmodernism alters Kraft's three methods of communication by merging monologue, dialogue, and life involvement; thereby creating a new context and means for

⁴⁵ Challies, 2011, 73.

communication to happen. Because of the digital connectedness and inter-activeness of Web 2.0, post-postmoderns seek to have life involvement with a larger group—their social network—where they focus on interactive discussions that start as monologues and can evolve into life transformation dialogues. Social networks have existed since the creation of Adam and Eve, but now a person can have multiple social networks that include not only their next-door neighbor but also someone thousands of miles away in another country. This idea of the individual living in tension amongst the interaction of their local and global connections characterizes what pastor Bob Roberts Jr. describes as glocalization. He says, “Glocal is in the everyday fabric of daily life in every dimension and domain. We are not alone, and neither are they. And ‘they’ are not as far away as we once thought.”⁴⁶ Globalization has expanded the idea of a social network to anyone that has online connectivity. Because of this redefinition of social networks, all three of Kraft's methods of communication are employed at one time by the post-postmodern in conveying truth and ideas. A monologue is now an open dialogue that anyone in the world can join in on, and the interaction that ensues is perceived as life involvement.

The identity and structure of community has always been central to how meaning is discerned and truth communicated. The post-postmodern culture experiences social networks digitally, providing the Church with two options: 1) abandon face-to-face social networks for digital social networks or 2) rethink how online social networks can be integrated into the community aspect of the Church. Social networks can provide multiple gospel interactions for unbelievers as a Christian communicates gospel truth with missional intentionality via posts, comments, blogs, videos, etc.

⁴⁶ Bob Roberts Jr., 2007, 16.

Interactive Learning and Communication

Another phenomenon of the post-postmodern cultural shift is the interactive nature of the author, the text, and the recipient and the inherent effect this has on learning and communication. Kelli Fuery explains in her book *New Media: Culture and Image* that humans are accustomed to some form of interactivity and, with the rise of the digital text, are experiencing a new era of interactivity conducted through new forms of digital media instead of traditional forms.⁴⁷ A key element of the interactive nature of the digital text is “the multiplicity of meanings generated for the subject and the technology that supports it.”⁴⁸ The possibility of interacting with multiple meanings mirrors what has been already discussed on the nature of the author, the text, and the recipient in postmodernism. In contrast, a person’s interaction with multiple meanings (postmodern) within a digital text coupled with the ability to take on an authorial (modern) role in the same text creates a unique desire for knowing that is characteristic of this post-postmodern tension.

Referencing new ways of designing learning environments for education, Bill Brandon, writer for the online *Learning Solutions Magazine*, speaks of this “digimodern” learning shift as he says, “the new paradigm of authority and knowledge does not mean the end of instructor-led courses, the Facebooking or Twitterization of eLearning, or the death of instructional design. Instead, it means the extension and expansion of opportunities for learning.”⁴⁹ Anya Kamenetz suggests that learners utilize how the Internet has evolved our concept and practice of interaction and form higher-education learning communities via social media platforms.⁵⁰ Interactive

⁴⁷ Fuery, Kelli. *New Media: Culture and Image* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 28-29.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁹ Brandon, Bill. "Digimodernism and Learning." By Bill Brandon : *Learning Solutions Magazine* (August 15, 2011) <http://www.learningsolutionsmag.com/articles/729/digimodernism-and-learning> (accessed September 03, 2012).

⁵⁰ Anya Kamenetz, *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Pub., 2010), 113-119.

learning ranges from Do-It-Yourself to University hybrid/online classes to learning communities established through Web 2.0 forms.

How then can Christians seize this opportunity for new ways of learning and interact with a society that is constantly searching for truth in this “multiplicity of meanings”? One way would be to rethink how the gospel message is understood by individuals who interact digitally.

Proclaiming and teaching the gospel must always have the end goal of the other person learning in order to understand. Traditionally, most theological learning within the Church has come from the sermon. Here the static text of Scripture is explained in monologue form so that the recipients learn the meaning of the text and interact with it by applying some principles learned. Within a post-postmodern culture, will presenting the meaning of the text in a one-way monologue and exhorting the congregants to apply the sermon point(s) increase or decrease the likelihood that learning has happened?

Creating interactive learning environments for gospel proclamation and inviting the listeners to interact with the text of Scripture being proclaimed can help the post-postmodern individual better grasp the meaning of the gospel found in the text. Preaching sermons, therefore, becomes a live invitation to interact with the text within a real-life social network—the gathered church. Sermon preparation can happen within online social networks as pastors glean from the insights of others or, if they desire, open up their own thoughts and questions about the text to their social networks. This invites not only the pastor’s church members into interacting with the text but also the pastor’s broader online social network. Tony Merida, teaching pastor of Imago Dei Church in Raleigh, NC mentioned how he tries to make his sermon points and other key statements “tweetable” for his people.⁵¹ Sermon points and ideas could be more effectively

⁵¹ Tony Merida, interview by author, Wake Forest, NC September 19, 2012.

communicated if they evolved from trite, alliterative phrases that cannot exist without the context of the rest of the monologue into easily shareable sentences that simply explain the point and can be interacted with on social media. Sermon delivery provides an environment where the pastor becomes the equipper of the members of the gospel community to go and missionally interact both physically and digitally within each individual's social networks. Designing and delivering a text (the sermon in this case) that can be interacted with for an extended period of time by anyone on earth with access to a Web 2.0 form can increase the learning capacity of the networked, post-postmodern individual as they digitally and physically interact with the sermon text within their physical and digital social networks.

Truth Oscillation, Tension Theology, and the Gospel Metanarrative

The philosophical implications of how communication and learning have evolved in a post-postmodern cultural context provide a unique window into the mindset of the post-postmodern individual. Philosophers Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker ascribe post-postmodernism the name “metamodernism” since the mood of post-postmodernism characterizes a tension of existing in *metaxis* or the “in-between.” They say, “The metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for [sense] and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all.”⁵² The current digital landscape creates an environment where multiple meanings and conversations fuse together to attempt to explain truth and reality. The post-postmodern, then, oscillates between claims of absolute truth (modernism) and dialogues on various global perspectives of that truth (postmodernism) as they engage their lives and minds with various Web 2.0 forms. This oscillation has left post-postmodernism seeking a truth it never

⁵² Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism" *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* no. 2 (2010), under “From the Postmodern to the Metamodern,” doi:10.3402/jac.v1i0.5677 (Accessed September 4, 2012).

really expects to find yet continues pursuing that truth simply for the sake of the pursuit. This search for meaning and truth from various glocal social networks engulfs the life of the post-postmodern and leads them on an endless journey, knowing they may never find the truth they are looking for.⁵³

This oscillation between paradoxical elements of finding meaning from somewhere feeds the post-postmodern's desire to make a difference in the world they live in by doing their part to correct an injustice. Since post-postmodernism as a cultural paradigm owes a large portion of its existence to the technological advances of the last few decades, and the "millennial" generation are those who were born since 1980; one can see that the mindset of the post-postmodern and the millennial align very well.⁵⁴ According to Thom and Jess Rainer's research, the millennial generation is known for being "incredibly motivated to make a difference in the world," and they are amazingly equipped to do so through the interactive learning opportunities afforded them.⁵⁵ Post-postmodernism thrives amongst a culture's desire to seek meaning and purpose while collaborating with like-minded sojourners through digital social networks.

Post-postmodernism has left a current culture seeking a truth they know will not be found while it pursues meaning through striving to change the world. The question now is will the current cultural paradigm ever succeed in finding its place while oscillating between the pursuit of meaning and the actualization of meaning? There exists no greater answer for the post-postmodern or metamodern person existing within the oscillation of the pursuit of meaning and a hungering for truth in a still-pluralistic society than the gospel metanarrative found in the Bible. The gospel story itself is a paradox of truths that Christians daily live in tension with. The

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Rainer, Thom S., and Jess W. Rainer. *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*. (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Pub. Group, 2011) 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 115-118.

narrative of the gospel shows us a Creator who is also Redeemer and a Servant who is also a King. The Bible tells the story of a ruling, powerful Lion who is also the mild, submissive Lamb who dies in order that life may be given. The believer in the gospel story is made righteous yet still exists as sinful all the while commissioned to be a maker of disciples of the man, Jesus, who was also God. The kingdom of God is active now on earth yet more fully exists in a future restoration of the earth. The gospel metanarrative presents itself as a paradoxical story that gives meaning and purpose to those who are willing to exist in the tension of what first appear as contradictions. As communicators of the gospel story, Christians can help post-postmoderns understand and interact with a story of good news that explains the paradox of God being full of wrath against mankind while full of love for that same mankind wherein which humanity finds forgiveness and meaning.

Conclusion: A Contextualized Gospel for a Post-Postmodern, Digital Culture

The post-postmodern culture must see the gospel metanarrative as something they can interact with both digitally and physically as they pursue meaning and community among the plethora of digital texts. With the interactivity provided by digital texts, the church can and must seek ways to contextualize the proclamation of the gospel story to a culture that speaks in one hundred forty characters or less, grasps information in short *YouTube* sound bites, and interacts with multiple texts with multiple people via multiple Web 2.0 forms. Ways of learning and communication evolve as cultures shift into new forms fitting the needs, emotions, and characteristics of a given society.

Therefore, followers of Jesus must contextualize the message of the gospel story and adapt their methods of communicating it so that a new, post-postmodern culture will learn, understand, and join the Christian community living in tension with the gospel story. The Church

is the paradoxical agent that must seek to bring the post-postmodern's search for meaning and truth and understanding to the social network of the Trinity and its gospel-formed community. The current post-postmodern cultural paradigm creates a generation of hopeful yet despairing, anonymous yet known, connected yet lonely individuals who search for truth among millions of web pages yet struggle to decide which view of a truth is actually true. The Church cannot afford to not contextualize the gospel story for a new culture and the new ways it learns and communicates. The good news of Jesus can stay the same yesterday, today, and forever within the gospel metanarrative, but the methods in which the Church communicates that gospel metanarrative to a post-postmodern culture cannot.

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Appendix 1: Various Terms Describing Post-Postmodernism

Vermeulen and Van Den Akker give a brief, descriptive list of some of the many propositions for a term to aptly describe this new cultural shift.⁵⁶ Gilles Lipovetsky uses the term “hypermodernism” reflecting his perception that current culture sits in a hyper-emotional paradox that leads just as easily to “hedonistic ecstasy as much as existential anguish.” Previously mentioned philosopher Alan Kirby, coined the term “digimodernism” linking the change in cultural paradigms to the evolution of digital technology. Robert Samuels suggests that post-postmodernism be termed “automodernism” due to the “correlation between ‘technological automation and human autonomy’.” Nicholas Bourriaud’s suggestion of “altermodernism” seems to be the least understood yet the most widely known conception in the latest discourses. Believing that none of these descriptions aptly comprehend post-postmodernism on both a philosophical and global scale, Vermeulen and Van Den Akker coin the term “metamodernism” describing the current cultural paradigm as existing paradoxically in tension with both modernity and postmodernity.

⁵⁶ Vermeulen, Timotheus, and Robin Van Den Akker. "Notes on Metamodernism" *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* no. 2 (2010), under “History Beyond ‘The End of History’” Art Beyond ‘The End of Art’.” doi:10.3402/jac.v1i0.5677. Accessed September 4, 2012.