

A Perspective on the Digitalization of the American Church

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Paradigm Shifts in the American Church

A shift is occurring in how the modern church in America approaches technology. Within the context of this analysis, the modern church is defined to be any 21st century church that is attempting to adapt to changing technological trends. With the invention of the YouVersion Bible Application and the popularization of the livestreamed church service by LifeChurch.TV, a megachurch (church with an attendance greater than 2,000 people) in Oklahoma, churches are having to make the decision whether or not to replace key elements of the church experience with their digital counterparts. Church services that were formerly highly communal events, now simply stream to the comfort of your own home, engaging over 250,000 people on a weekly basis (*About Church Online*, n.d.). In addition, the YouVersion Bible Application has been downloaded on over 400 million unique devices (“The Bible App,” n.d.). The clear influence that these technologies are having on the American church is evidence of a greater paradigm shift that is occurring in the church that herein is termed the digitalization of the American church. As such, the work of Thomas Kuhn helps analyze this change through the framework of the paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1964). This situation is quite complex and has many facets through which it can be analyzed; however, the clearest issue is how engagement in church services is influenced by these technologies. Therefore, the following pages contain analysis on the question of: how have the shifts in technology usage, created by the Bible app and livestreaming of services, influenced the level of engagement that people exhibit in church?

Research Question and Methods

The effect that new technologies have on the level of engagement in American churches is studied primarily using document-based research. This style of research is done in an effort to avoid limiting the scope to merely the nearby church population. Tim Hutchings, an assistant professor of religious ethics at the University of Nottingham, has conducted much research analyzing the societal implications of the YouVersion Bible App as well as the concept of a digital church (Hutchings, 2014, 2015, 2017). His work is used to showcase the concerns and future implications that these technologies are having and will continue to have on the church culture.

In answering the question of level of engagement, this research paper analyzes these technologies using research on digital learning. The work completed by Dana Badulescu, an Associate Professor of English at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, on digital learning and e-reading will be used as well to give a basis for engagement in digital Bible reading (Badulescu, n.d.). In addition to answering these questions, it also showcases other positive results that arise from the adoption of these new technologies – namely the broad increase of reach of the church due to social media engagement, and the lack of spatial limitations. This analysis seeks to provide a perspective through which churches in America can begin viewing new technologies and effectively judge whether or not to adopt them into their services. In this thesis, the YouVersion Bible Application and livestreamed church services are used as primary evidence of the paradigm shift that motivates the need for a new lens through which churches can analyze technology.

A Framework for Analyzing Technology in the Church

While there is no singular united mission statement across all Christian churches, to identify what the church community is designed to look like, one must turn to the Biblical text.

In the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles, the church is described in the following way: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42, New International Version). The root of the issue of whether or not churches should adopt new technologies is found in this verse, and explained simply as ‘are we losing any of these four core devotions if we adopt this technology?’ Nonetheless, many churches in America have prioritized growing the size of the church at the cost of intimacy found in the early church. The reason for this tension is arguably not out of poor intention, but rather out of a lack of a clear view of where reverence ends and innovation begins.

The vast differences on this issue between denominations of the church is too broad to discuss in the course of this thesis. Nonetheless, the broad term of church will be used to refer to the overarching establishment of Christian bodies currently holding some form of weekly service. While this is incredibly broad, the implications of these technologies should not vary across denominations as the people comprising individual churches are the primary focus and human connection knows not denomination or sect. Therefore, it can be reasonably said that the framework provided for evaluating new technologies in the church can be widely applied across denominations.

The following pages analyze the impacts of two technologies, the YouVersion Bible App and livestreamed church services; however, in discussing these it is important to note that no churches have been identified as phasing out old technologies to bring these into their churches. The issue being discussed revolves not around whether these technologies are suitable replacements, as it will be shown that they clearly are not, but rather does the allowance of these technologies as a supplement to what is already being done provide an improvement or detriment to the engagement of churchgoers?

STS Framework

As mentioned previously, the paradigm shift that is observed in American churches was analyzed using the work of Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn, 1964). There are many critiques of Kuhn's work mainly revolving around the simplicity of his work. On the one hand, Kuhn is criticized for being far too broad in his use of the term paradigm (Von Dietze, 2001). This criticism is navigated by narrowing the view of paradigms in the context of the American church to simply how the church uses and adopts new technologies into their services. This identified shift is a result of a tension between the social resistance technological innovation. In this sense, there exists tangible tension between sacred tradition and new technology. For this reason, Kuhn's work provides a helpful lens to analyze the occurrence of this shift.

Another major critique of Kuhn's work is by Martin Cohen, a British philosopher, that his theory oversimplifies scientific discovery leading to a view that discovery is merely a popular adoption of a worldview as opposed to revealing truth (Cohen, 2015). In this context, it could justifiably be argued that saying that the sacredness of the Bible and the importance of a physical church congregation are merely a fading paradigm is a drastic oversimplification. If this were to be argued, it would be accurate; however, it is argued here that the proper application of the paradigm shift is one from a paradigm in which churches focus on the roots of their existence and seek to increase the depth of relationships within the body to one in which a greater emphasis is placed in the widening breadth of reach of the church. Placing the paradigm shift in this context avoids any drastic oversimplification as it truly is simply a shift of mentality.

The Implications of New Technologies on the Modern Church

The adoption of new technologies into the church have affected engagement in two major ways. The first, and most obvious way, is in the way in which churches can now engage a

population unrestricted by geography or level of commitment. Life.Church, the first megachurch to notably livestream their services now engages people on a weekly basis in 47 different countries, despite only having physical locations in one country. The second, and less obvious implication, is that technologies introduced to the church serve to persuade users towards certain habits of engagement. The Bible app, for instance serves to persuade its users towards frequent disjointed encounters with Scripture without any emphasis on deep study of the text through suggestive features such as, the verse of the day in which YouVersion chooses one verse or chunk of verses and prompts all app users to read it without offering the broader context. In contrast, when holding a physical Bible, it is impossible to ignore the existence of both preceding and antecedent context of every passage. In a similar vein, online church services serve to emphasize the idea that these digital communities provide the full type of engagement and fellowship found in the physical church. Thus, the church needs a framework for evaluating how these technologies ought to be used, both in view of the very positive broadness of reach the church and in the drawbacks in terms of dissociative engagement. To build this framework, the construction of the Biblical text must first be discussed to fully comprehend the potential gains and losses in its digitization.

The Holy Bible, a compilation of sixty-six books containing history, poetry, prophecy, and various other types of literature. A book once treated with such reverence, symbolic of a Divine word being brought before the people. A text so deeply cherished by its original readers that nearly two hundred of its chapters would be memorized by the age of thirteen. The sole text believed by Christians worldwide to be the divinely inspired, ever-applicable handbook for life, breathed out of the mouth of God Himself is now conveniently compressed into a single application.

The digitization of the Bible has led to much discussion in the church, in terms of its potential impact and intended usage. The implications of this revolve around both the efficacy of e-reading compared to traditional means, as well as the shift in sacred perception of the text.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, people who read from e-books read more frequently compared to those who read other kinds of books (Rainie et al., 2012). Religious e-reading shares this same sentiment. Hutchings, in his work *E-Reading and the Christian Bible*, demonstrates that the people surveyed used the Bible at work, the gym, in church, and at home. His survey also establishes that the ability to take the Bible with you anywhere is a huge positive factor in terms of people's relationship with the text (Hutchings, 2015).

The concern here is whether the increased availability of Scripture is a beneficial enough factor to counteract the loss of additional tactile components of reading a physical book. Research, published in the 2012 *International Journal of Educational Research*, shows that "readers often recall where in a text some particular piece of information appeared (e.g. toward the upper right corner or at the bottom of the page)" (Mangen et al., 2013). This becomes a problem in reading from YouVersion because the layout has ill-defined pages as the text can be continuously swiped through leaving the user without any spatial recognition. Their research also showed that much of reading constructs this mental map coordinating all of the information on the page into a cohesive picture that is highly influenced by the physical elements such as size and placement of the text as well as the very physical and tactile nature of the paper and the introduction of changing positions of text on a scrolling screen disrupts this mental construction (Mangen et al., 2013). Thus, the question becomes what is the proper role of digital Bible applications in the church?

This question has a highly debated answer. On the one hand, placing Scripture in the hands of millions of people at no cost allows for a much wider reach, but does someone mature past using a Bible app? The YouVersion Bible Application allows their users to select from a wide variety of Bible plans, some that provide the user with a scheduled plan to read through the entire Bible in as quickly as three months, as well as others that simply provide one verse per day. The concern among many church leaders is that the widespread adoption of the Bible app is leading to less Biblically literate Christian population. The survey results from Hutchings work supported this concern with respondents listing that “we must be deliberate and careful not to allow God’s Holy Word to become just another app” and others sharing concerns that since their phones are so frequently used for entertainment or work, that it is difficult to give any kind of reverence to the time spent reading a digital Bible (Hutchings, 2015). The digitization of the Bible allows user to have a greater control as to what content they consume, for instance, the social media integration of the Bible app allows users to post short verses and share their thoughts – thereby in one sense placing large amounts of spiritual authority in the hands of the users. The issue of misplaced spiritual authority is a concern raised by Wagner, she argues that the digital Bible fragments the cannon of Scripture (Wagner, 2012). So, in this sense, the technology of the Bible app is not neutral – it has an agenda for its users and this agenda must be analyzed within the context of this paradigm shift.

Hutchings emphasizes this point in his work from 2014 that, “Digital Bibles must be understood not just as personal reading tools but as designed technologies, carefully structured to promote particular practices and values” (Hutchings, 2014). Bobby Gruenwald, the app’s cofounder describes their approach as an attempt to shift their attention from content to engagement by implementing various aspects, such as social media integration and a

gamification of the Bible where users receive badges and recognition for finishing their reading plans (Gruenwald, 2012). Since the writing of Gruenwald's piece, the Bible app has also integrated a streak system where users receive push notifications reminding them to keep their Bible reading streak alive much like the streak concept notably implemented by Snapchat. These features indicate that the Bible app's approach places a large emphasis on the frequency of user interaction within the app and uses this as an indicator for the degree to which the Word of God is saturating peoples' lives. Nonetheless, the question must be raised as to whether or not this is a sufficient indicator for a person's engagement with the Bible.

The Apostle Paul, writes in his exhortation to the church in Rome, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:2, New International Version). This spiritual principle of inward renewal has been something believed by Christians throughout the ages to come through extravagant time in God's Word – so the natural point of analysis is whether the Bible app allows for this type of sacred inner-renewal. Inner-renewal is not something that is easily measured, but many Bible movements such as the Gideons have taken the stance that, "analysis and interpretation may be valuable, but they are ultimately secondary to the force of the plain [Biblical] text" (Hutchings, 2014). This perspective is also supported by what is written in the book of Hebrews, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12, New International Version). If this perspective is to be held as sufficient it would be sensible to conclude that the Bible app serves to engage people with the Bible quite effectively. Nonetheless, it is worth analyzing as to how the Bible app effects the sacred and systematic understanding of the text.

A key aspect of comprehending pieces of the Bible is understanding the literary context in which it is written. For instance, the book of Psalms is a book of poetry, worship songs, and prayer offered to God demonstrating the real emotional experience of contemporaries of the Old Testament. This book showcases raw frustration and anger both towards God and towards people, if this book were to be viewed under the same literary framework as one of Jesus' sermons it would lead to clear misinterpretations of what role emotions and frustrations play in the Christian faith. Likewise, for each type of literature found in the Bible it requires a firm grasp of the literary style in order to properly understand what is written. Hutchings research involved surveying hundreds of Bible app users and one common sentiment shared is that this conceptualization of the broader context of Scripture is almost completely lost in the digital Bible now that passages and books can be quickly clicked through in random order (Hutchings, 2015).

Similar to the Bible app, online church communities serve as another interesting case study for analyzing how engagement is affected by new technology. The argument in support of the Bible app is that it allows people to bring the Word of God with them wherever they go, and that this new convenience allows people to engage more often with Scripture. Transportability does not parallel quite as well to the realm of digital communities. While, online churches have made sermons, worship and other elements of the service available on-demand from these digital church platforms none have yet to provide any kind of face-to-face contact.

Life.Church, at the time of writing, employs 657 volunteers to occupy and put on over 90 digital experiences all throughout the week, these experiences they affectionately term Church Online (*About Church Online*, n.d.). This online experience differs from simply listening to a podcast or recording of a sermon by the fact that it provides the attendees with a digital service-

host who moderates a chat board that people can use during the service to communicate with others and react to the word that is being preached. In addition to this, the live worship that was performed when the message was given is also broadcast in the digital service. Church Online also provides an option to receive prayer during the service by clicking a button that will place them in a private communication channel with a volunteer. Hutchings in his experience with this system describes it in the following way, “These instructions [to receive prayer] suggest that the public space of the chat window was considered an inappropriate place for prayer... which does not parallel anything I have observed in the other churches I studied” (Hutchings, 2017).

Life.Church has tried many different iterations of how communication should function in the Church Online experience.

However, despite much experimentation in this area, communication is still the largest concern among church leaders in creating a digital community. Life.Church has created digital spaces as closely emulate the church experience as possible, even going so far as to create their own digital church within the game Second Life, an immersive virtual reality game created in 2003. The digital church was comprised of a scale model of one of the actual campuses in Oklahoma and would at scheduled times broadcast live worship and sermons into the game environment. This part of the Church Online experience, is no longer active but emphasizes the great lengths to which Life.Church has gone to attempt to innovate the creation of church communities in obscure places. Even still it is further emphasized by how Senior Pastor and Founder, Craig Groeschel, phrases it in their vision statement, “We will do anything short of sin to reach people who don’t know Christ. To reach people no one is reaching, we’ll have to do things no one is doing” (Groeschel, n.d.).

It is difficult to describe how effective connection can possibly be through the digital sphere, nonetheless to reframe around the passage from Acts mentioned previously, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42, New International Version). The concern for every church considering the usage of a digital substitute for physical church meetings should be, is this platform still allowing for the type of devoted community described in Jesus’ time. It would be difficult to argue that digital interactions fully measure up to the fullness of physical community. Nonetheless, it is clear that the vision of Life.Church is to bring people into community even if they are unwilling to get up from their couches. For this reason, Church Online serves in their view to bridge the gap between the familiarity of home and the mystery of church. While their efforts are clearly still evolving as the ministry matures, it should be posited that the goal of a digital church is to either provide an opportunity to hear spiritual truth in moments where attending a church is not possible, but should not be designed in such a way that the digital experience could ever replace a face-to-face church community.

Unfortunately, this work is still very limited as all churchgoers cannot be easily grouped into one population. It is quite possible that what works for one generation or sect of the population will not work for others. In addition to this, these technologies are still fairly new in the context of a 2000-year-old religious establishment so the fullest long-term impact is not yet being observed.

At the time of writing, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic which has forced churches to be forced into not meeting in-person. Until this point, church online has never had to be a total substitute for any other kind of church experience so in the future it should be analyzed to see how in the aftermath of this pandemic whether churches that have been forced to go online

will continue afterwards. It will also provide an interesting point of discussion to see whether or not enthusiasm will grow for attending church after having it limited by government regulations.

Holistically this research contributes to the field of STS by bringing to light the shifting paradigm in the church from being focused on the depth of involvement to wide spread reach of the church. Kuhn's work here allows for it to be shown that the engagement issues identified in the church are far from being oversimplified, but allude to the broader need for the framework which has been identified from the book of Acts. This research also brings to light how shifting paradigms can occur within religious establishments anchored deeply in 2,000-year-old traditions.

Conclusion

It is clear that the church is deeply in need of a way to evaluate the adoption of new technologies. The framework spelled out in the book of Acts gives a fourfold evaluation for how these technologies change the church's functionality: teaching, fellowship, sharing meals, and prayer. The Bible app while not disrupting any of these four major areas on the surface, does provide a new level of engrained persuasion to teach users to read and engage with the text in a particular way that should be analyzed further. However, the livestreamed church service provides many more issues in terms of the level in which it disrupts the church's functionality. No digital community has yet to provide any sort of deep socialization equivalent to what would happen over a meal, nor does anything rival the type of intimate fellowship achievable in physical church communities. Nonetheless, the continuity provided between Church Online and the physical Life.Church locations creates a unique opportunity to check out church without ever having to leave the comfort of their own home, but should be viewed as an opportunity to engage future church-goers as opposed to serving as an alternative meeting location for the church itself.

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