Chapter 5: The Global Village: Scripture in Time and Space

Many analysts have been misled by electric media because of the seeming ability of these media to extend man's spatial powers of organization. Electric media, however, abolish the spatial dimension, rather than enlarge it. By electricity, we everywhere resume person-to-person relations as if on the smallest village scale. … Dialogue supercedes the lecture. The greatest dignitaries hobnob with youth. When a group of Oxford undergraduates heard that Rudyard Kipling received ten shillings for every word he wrote, they sent him ten shillings by telegram during their meeting: "Please send us one of your very best words." Back came the word a few minutes later: "Thanks."

Marshall McLuhan[1]

What has been difficult for traditional missions and churches to grasp is the collapse of time and space in the postmodern context.

Doug McConnell[2]

The research hasn't caught up yet, but a simple Google search on "teens text each other in the same room" pulls up thousands of conversations by parents who don't understand their digital native kids. One dad of a sixteen year old girl writes, "During dinner, I noticed that the girls had their mobile phones out and were text messaging. However, what I did not realize at first is that they were text messaging each other…while sitting at the same table!" Another parent responds, "I hate that! I have no idea why kids text when they are sitting next to each other."[3]

Digital immigrants are mystified. Why do kids act as if they are not close to each other? Their confusion is justified—they do not live with a reconfigured perception of distance. For the digital native, physical proximity has become irrelevant for relationship. The technologies of

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[1] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 342.

[2] Steve Taylor, *The Out of Bounds Church?: Learning to Create a Community of Faith in a Culture of Change* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2005), 10.

[3] "Teenagers and Text Messaging," Blog, *Calm, Cool, and Connected*, September 16, 2009, http://calmcoolconnected.com/2009/09/16/teenagers-and-text-messaging/.

instant messaging ("IM") via personal computer, or SMS messages via handheld cell/smart phones allow the same experience of textual dialog[4] whether one is down the street or across the country—or ten feet apart.

This is the information environment of digital culture: always present. People are not far, and neither is knowledge. Of course, there is something of this that began in the transition from manuscript to print culture. Eisenstein explains how scholarship of the middle ages required travel—knowledge was anchored to select places. With the printing press, multiple copies allowed knowledge to travel to a nearby university library. "To consult different books, it was no longer so essential to be a wandering scholar," she writes.[5] Today's mass print market shows analog pre-cursors to the digital information environment. And the key advent of the electric telegraph marks the beginning of the new era that severs the link between geography and knowledge. But the final move from the modern library to handheld device is dramatic. Over three million dictionary articles in English via online dictionary Wikipedia are available on a handheld device. No wonder digital natives not only *text* in the same room, but complain about "reserve" books that require walking down the street to the library. Why isn't this information available here, with me?

Linking Time and Space: Acoustic Space and Simultaneity

Possibly the most quoted of McLuhan's aphorisms is his description of the "global village"[6] It survives as a increasingly relevant but diluted go-to term for TV journalists and

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[4] What we will later introduce as "tertiary orality." See Chapter 6.

[5] Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 72.

[6] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 31.. "But certainly the electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous "field" in all human affairs so that the human family now exists under conditions of a 'global village'." McLuhan's first mention of the concept in popular print, though he used it earlier two years prior in academic work: Levinson, *Digital McLuhan*, 65. The idea appears with clarity throughout *Understanding Media*, such as in the header quote for this chapter, or more consisely on page 6, "As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village."

popular bloggers as a general synonym for globalization. McLuhan's use of the metaphor, however, was more precise. It links our discussion of space to the discussion of time.

For McLuhan, the information environment of the pre-modern village is one of simultaneity. The town crier's voice reached everyone at same time—news for one was news for all. This is *acoustic space*. Classically in politics, the Athenian city-state worked ideally when the quantity of voting citizens remained comfortably within the number of those who could stand within earshot of a speaker. To call this a simultaneous environment then is to speak of information in both time and space: it is instant but its range is limited.

The advent of typographic print dramatically expanded the reach of information, but "shattered the simultaneity."[7] Reading is a solitary event, and information in newspapers is read by readers at their own convenience. Print media individualizes time. Only headline-shouting newsies translated what is natively an asynchronous medium to the oral immediacy of the acoustic village, incorporating all those within hearing distance.

The beginnings of radio and television are McLuhan's native environment, and he notes with his metaphor that, reversing the trend of print, news has become simultaneous again. Broadcast events from the 1938 radio drama "War of the Worlds" to investigative reporter Edward R. Murrow's reports on Senator Joe McCarthy are experienced simultaneously by a mass audience that remains within "hearing distance"—reflecting the immediacy of the village.[8] The same TV anchor looks into a million eyes at once and is heard saying the same thing. Time and space are collapsed.

So what of the digital culture? Does the Internet retain the simultaneity—the "live-ness"—of the original village that TV and radio retrieved? Under McLuhan's definition of acoustic space, we find that the Internet doesn't quite meet the qualifications. Websites are available twenty-four hours a day in a web browser, but their content is not broadcast, it is

[7] Levinson, *Digital McLuhan*, 65.

[8] Or more modern examples like the national tragedy of September 11, 2001 or cable television news reporting of US Presidential election results.

retrieved by the viewer. This retrieval is asynchronous—does not depend on the clock time. One user can view identical content that another user views thirty minutes later. New content is "posted," but is not "sent." Though attempts have been made to mimic television culture by creating advertised "live" events online, these approaches are not native to the digital medium, and the content—perhaps a live chat with a celebrity or a video webcast of a concert—is almost always available to subsequent viewers who do not tune in at the precise time. This is not acoustic behavior. Walter Ong reminds us that sound depends on the present, and that paused sound is simply null, that is, silence. "No other sensory field totally resists a holding action in quite this way," he observes.[9] In the sense that digital information can be held and accessed at any time, it appears to resemble the not the acoustic village nor the global village but the printed book.

Yet asynchronous access—though similar to print—updates to a new manifestation in digital culture. The ability to *time shift* is natural in the information context. While we've always been able to pause print—we can stop reading and pick a book up later—we can now freeze acoustic/broadcast as well. For example, it is no longer important what time a television show "airs," and digital natives don't pay much attention at advertisements that announce "10pm ET/9pm CT." The DVR (digital video recorder) allows the show to be recorded and accessed on demand, whether the next day, or not untypically "15 minutes late" (a 9pm show begun at 9:15 using the DVR technology) to allow friends to arrive and add "buffer" to skip advertisements. Increasingly common—to the tune of 38 million viewers—is the use of sites like Hulu.com which provide full length video access to popular TV shows, available any time to play, pause, or access midway through.[10]

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[9] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32.

[10] Dan Frommer, "CHART OF THE DAY: Hulu Has More Viewers Than Time Warner Cable," *The Business Insider: Silicon Alley Insider*, August 28, 2009, http://www.businessinsider.com/chart-of-the-day-hulu-has-more-watchers-than-time-warner-cable-2009-8.

The Water Cooler, YouTube, and Virtual Simultaneity

So digital culture is bound to neither space nor time. It is instantly accessible, like the acoustic or global villages, and it is asynchronous, like print.

Yet there is another phenomenon to consider and it requires widening our observations to the group. The context of digital culture can retain a *social* sense of *shared live experience* more like television than books. Books, even ones read by a group at once (for instance, students concurrently enrolled in a semester course), aren't often the object of "water-cooler moments." This television-era phrase refers to events in dramatic TV shows or broadcast sporting events that were likely to be seen by so many people that they were talked about in the office the next day. TV interacted with daily life via conversations with co-workers in the break room. "Did you see Dragnet last night?!"[11]

The digital equivalent is the YouTube meme where a new popular video clip rapidly increases in popularity and views within a short period of time, a phenomenon some journalists have labeled: "going viral."[12] The reference is biological, and each "viral" video's fame is similarly spread—by word of mouth—exponentially to masses within certain communities (often millions viewing it within days).

"Did you see the wedding dance video?" is what is said at the water cooler.[13] The key language change is the absence of a chronological reference. The video clip or new event is verbally referenced using unique key words, titles, or personalities (subsets of key words) but, consistent with a time shift culture, does not mention "Tuesday" or "last night," even if the event

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[11] The radio and television crime drama of the 1950s and late 1960s was a little before my time, but we can imagine this quote.

[12] "Memes are units of information, which are replicated from one agent to another" as defined by Henry M. Piironen, "A very short introduction to memetics," 2009, http://www.kolumbus.fi/henrympiironen/Memetics.html. Piironen argues that information memes replicate and maintain the cultural information space. His academic work is promising, but we don't address it here. Less technically, the phrase "internet meme" is popularly understood as a brief piece of information, story, video, or image that has gained exponential popularity on the internet.

[13] At this writing in the Fall of 2009, a wedding video on YouTube of a couple named "Jill and Kevin" has received over 30 million views, and generated multiple remixes (See Chapter 7), the most of famous of which was broadcast during a recent episode of NBC's television show The Office. For the original meme see *JK Wedding Entrance Dance*, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-94JhLEiN0&feature=youtube_gdata.

originated in broadcast media like television ("did you see Hillary on Saturday Night Live?").[14] Sites such as www.knowyourmeme.com—an "internet meme database:—have now appeared, serving as a near-term historian for "viral videos, image macros, catchphrases, web celebs" and more that have exceeded a certain threshold, passing from time-free experience to time-based experience.

This experience of digital natives as "live" but not truly "live" mediation (in the sense of acoustic village or television/radio global village) needs a designation, so we might call it: *virtual simultaneity*. Amateur-sourced video clips posted to YouTube, or originally broadcast via another medium (for instance, television content posted to Hulu) are experienced asynchronously like print if they are not popular, but once they gain notoriety, quickly become a "simultaneous" event for a filtering community, allowing interaction *as if* those in the community received or participated at the same time.

The following chart may help us summarize our observations:

FIGURE: DIGITAL INFORMATION IN TIME AND SPACE

	Time	Space
Oral	Synchronous	Local
Print	Asynchronous	Global
Broadcast	Synchronous	Global
Digital	Asynchronous / Virtually Simultaneous	Global / Local

Digital culture represents a collapse of time and space. And what we mean is not simply that digital technologies connect globally disparate locations or that information is instantaneous, although these observations are part of the picture. But the collapse is the dissolution of the

[14] Sometimes time language is used to define a range, such as "this week"

categories that were helpful in previous media eras. Digital culture can be both simultaneous and asynchronous, and it can be both limited and global. The distinctions blurred, digital natives do not deny time and space as realities, they simply don't see them as relevant. If this is the case, then, what is the potential affect on the perception and nature of scripture?

Scripture in Collapsed Time and Space

To speak of Scripture in digital time and space is to construct a theology of the "present." To be present is to be local and geographically here, yet to be present is to be neither past nor future but now. *Present* is a statement about both time and space.

When is Scripture?

Many of the questions from the print era on the doctrine of scripture revolve around issues of time and space—for scripture: when and where? The *when* question is often asked in the category of inspiration. Is God's Word inspired at the point it is written—that is, inspired through the author at the time of writing? This line of questioning under the hot lens of historical-criticism makes the dating of books so important that it is the first thing taught in "Introductions" to books of the Bible, and required memorization for seminary students. As views have diverged on this area—theologically liberal positions often tending to date books later and conservative positions concerned to maintain earlier—print scholars often found themselves flipping to the back of the book for a table on dating as a quick measure of doctrinal purity. Once we understand that the asynchronous time-orientation of print concerns itself with the past, a correlation suggests itself. The print-theologians are concerned with time.

Neo-orthodox and postliberal scholars have tried to make the issue less of a concern—by re-clocking the doctrine of scriptural inspiration toward the reader. For Karl Barth, the Holy Spirit's action when God's word is read is where inspiration lies. This caused biblical scholars

to "accuse Barth of being the enemy of historical criticism."[15] Similarly, for Hans Frei, the *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* includes the failed frameworks of history as a foundational criteria—rather saying the inspiration (and then authority) of scripture is in the cultural-linguistic religious community. If we understand the time-orientation of broadcast media as synchronous and therefore in the *now*, we can again suggest a correlation. The broadcast-theologians are concerned with the current.

Yet whether print-theologians (as liberal or conservative) or broadcast theologians (as "post" one or the other), the question of *when* has remained key. Which is it—past or current? One cannot be the other.

Walter Ong, thinking of the liturgical practice of the church, says that the use of scripture favors the oral—and therefore acoustic/current—orientation:

> In Christianity, for example, the Bible is read aloud at liturgical services. For God is thought of always as 'speaking' to human beings, not as writing to them. The orality of mindset in the Biblical text, even in its epistolary sections, is overwhelming. The Hebrew *dabar*, which means word, means also event and thus refers directly to the spoken word. The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word. In Trinitarian theology, the Second Person of the Godhead is the Word, and the human analogue for the Word here is not the human written word but the human spoken word. God the Father 'speaks' to his Son: he does not inscribe him.[16]

We imagine Ong would appreciate the theologies of scripture that locate inspiration closer to the hearing of the Word. Yet there is more to it. Ong also writes of ancient Homeric bards who emphasized the present performance of historical "texts." He explains that no two performances in the Homeric memory tradition would be the identically same, though all would tell the same story.[17] Memory speaks of the past, but performance speaks of the present.

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[15] Cunningham, "Karl Barth," 184.

[16] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 74.

[17] Ibid., 59. Originality in this oral storytelling was not about adding new material or content, but being able to adapt and rearrange the historic tale to those attentive at the time. See Chapter 7 on Remix.

Digital media culture is as comfortable with simultaneity as it is with asynchronous access—which is to say that it sees no contradiction between the current and the past. A digital "theology of the present" in the sense of time is not to reject the past in favor of the current or the current in favor of the past, but to embrace the past in its present realization. Past is important because it is prior.

This is why Vanhoozer's attempts to think about the inspiration of Scripture the both past and the current could resonate with a digital audience. Recall Vanhoozer's metaphors surrounding dramatic productions and the stage. Scripture is a script for the performance of the church. In the "triune economy of divine communicative action," "the Scriptures are the Spirit's work from first to last,"—encompassing "Spirited authorial practices" and "Spirited readerly practices."[18] Carefully constructing the Spirit's role, Vanhoozer writes, "To call the Bible inspired is to name a unity of a particular kind, a theological rather than a literary unity, or better, a theo-dramatic unity wherein the Spirit prompts human speakers so to write and the church so to hear the Scriptures as bearing witness to what God was saying and doing in Christ."[19] This formulation does not ignore the time-dimension, but does not heavily concern itself with it, comfortable, as digital culture is, with a both-and conception of time.

When is scripture? For a time-shifting digital culture, scripture is prior, but it is now. This perhaps isn't as cryptic as it is eschatological. Augustine's vision of a coming hope draws on a picture of God's communicative action that is not time-bound:

> Let them praise you, your angelic peoples above the heavens, who have no need to look up at the vault and learn by reading your Word in it; for they behold your face unceasingly, and there read without the aid of time-bound syllables the decree of your eternal will…. Their book is never closed, their scroll never rolled up, for you are their book and are so eternally…"[20]

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[18] Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 226-31.

[19] Ibid., 231.

[20] Augustine, *The Confessions*, 314.. I first noticed this in Pamala Bright's summary of Augustine's doctrine of scripture in Cunningham, "Karl Barth.", but she was making an unrelated point.

Where is Scripture?

We've said that McLuhan's global village doesn't allow us to treat time and space as unlinked, and these two meanings meet in the idea of *present*—which speaks of both. The question of the location of scripture is not one addressed by theologians, although Augustine's quote above points us in a direction. For his vision, the "angelic peoples" behold God not by a scroll or book but by his face—his presence. This experience of revelation is both timeless and location-less—Augustine does not speak of a God's face as though one might look toward it or away from it, but rather as it reveals unceasingly. Perhaps it's fair to describe Augustine's vision as an environment of God's revelation.

A contemporary Christian worship song penned by Rich Mullins repeats "Everywhere I go, I see you." This is to speak theologically (and doxologically) about the ubiquitous presence of God in relation to his creation—human and otherwise (Ps 139.7-12), and to speak of the revealing presence of God in the created order, a category that is often described as general revelation or common grace, but we have previously asserted as linked with special revelation as well. Indeed, Vanhoozer affirms this placement of scripture as a category of something created, writing, "Scripture is 'holy,' but its nature partakes of the creature, not the Creator."[21] But is it possible to say, "Everwhere I go, I see creation," is it possible to say "Everywhere I go, I see scripture?"

The digital perception makes it more of a possibility. For a digital native who carries both relationships and knowledge in their pocket, who is unmindful of place—the print-orientation of God's Words stored between two covers is dissolved. Instead, scripture has the potential to be divided, transmitted, remixed, perpetuated as memes—culturally replicable chunks of information that Henry Piironen say make up the "context of information reality." Lossless digital replication of information allows memes to grow from a core idea to skeletal

[21] Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine*, 227.

information frame with people as perceptual nodes, and Piironen was surprised to see this idea appearing in scripture:

> In some sense of amusement I have found this very same phenomenon of exosomatic virtual extensions from a source thousands of years old …from the New Testament:
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> "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. …Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular."
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> As a notion, in Apostle Paul's terms, Christ is the information complex, the information system that unites the members of Christianity to form the superorganism of Christ, and to the logic of the information system He is and the head of the superorganism is Christ himself. The important thing to note is that is the information complexes that are collectively shared makes it possible for societies to function as a superorganism, … Again, information reality is composed of all actively existing information complexes in collective consciousness. It is divided to each living human, whose internal information complexes are then integrated together.[22]

Put another way—scripture broken into information memes become a continuous environment embodied by the Body of Christ—the church.[23] Scripture becomes a tree: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; [32] it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Matt 13.31-32)

Where is scripture? In the context of the information environment, scripture is everywhere.

So considering the perceived collapse of time and space in digital culture, we can probe towards scripture. Print doctrines of scripture have emphasized time and space by speaking of historical sources and deposits of truth. By contrast, we can take tentative steps towards a theology of the "present" from the digital context, which sees scripture in time as a present

[22] Piironen, "Introduction to Memetics."

[23] We'll deal with the relationship between scripture and the church more directly in Chapter 6: Scripture in the Filtering Community

performance dependant on the past, and scripture in space as part of the information environment.

Our next probe begins with a more tangible aspect of the digital context: Facebook.