

COMMUNICATING THE TEXT IN THE POSTMODERN ETHOS OF CYBERSPACE: CAUTIONS REGARDING THE TECHNOLOGY AND THE TEXT

by
Rodney J. Decker*

In today's cultural vortex of rapid technological change, half-truths and outright falsehoods swirl around us, buffeting our common sense while lifting our imaginations to new heights of revelry. Every day we hear of the promises of cyberspace, the possibilities of the Internet, and breakthroughs in all manner of computer technologies.¹

Technophiles wax messianic over new devices and bedazzle their auditors with "breathless prophecies of social regeneration" through the latest technology.² Cyberspace has been nearly deified.³ There have been

*Dr. Rodney J. Decker is Associate Professor of New Testament at Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at a BBS faculty forum (12/11/98), the eastern ETS regional meeting in Meyerstown, PA (3/26/99), and at the Bible Faculty Summit held at Central Baptist Seminary, Minneapolis (8/5/99). Some revisions and additions have been made for publication.

¹Douglas Groothuis, *The Soul in Cyber-Space* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), p. 9. *Cyberspace* was coined in the 1984 novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. It refers to "the 'space' in which computer-mediated communication occurs, that is, to the interface between digital bits and human consciousness—or between silicon and the soul" (ibid., pp. 13–14). Groothuis's book is the best Christian treatment of the subject that I have found. My indebtedness to his thoughtful discussion is evident in the article.

²Ibid., pp. 10–11.

³Technology has become a god "in the sense that people believe technology works, that they rely on it, that it makes promises, that they are bereft when denied access to it, that they are delighted when they are in its presence, that for most people it works in mysterious ways, that they condemn people who speak against it, that they stand in awe of it, and that in the born-again mode, they will alter their lifestyles, their schedules, their habits, and their relationships to accommodate it. If this be not a form of religious belief, what is?" (Neil Postman, *The End of Education* [NY: Knopf, 1995], p. 38). Slouka's reaction is similar: "The literature of cyberspace, I now began to see, was all about salvation. The new, electronic millennium. Transcending time and space, the family and the body" (Mark Slouka, *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality* [New York: Basic Books, 1995], p. 29).

utopians throughout history and contemporary technology has now produced its share of “digitopians.”⁴ On the other hand, there is no end to the nay-sayers (both secular and religious) who are convinced that Armageddon is just around the corner—cyberspace is the kingdom of Antichrist. But we need to view all this carefully before we adopt the technological panaceas that will certainly bring in the kingdom—or before we retreat to non-technological enclaves to await our deliverance at the Rapture.⁵ Unfortunately, getting a handle on cyberspace is “akin to corralling a tornado.”⁶ Due to the complexity of the issues and the enormous volume of information written about the information age, this paper could easily have become a book-length treatment. Instead temporal necessities have enforced a highly selective look at the situation. Hopefully a few of the more crucial aspects of the discussion have been highlighted.⁷

⁴One of the most obvious examples of a digitopian is Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Random House, 1996). A volume that would be worth reading in this regard is *Responsible Technology*, ed. Stephen Monsma (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Although written when cyberspace was only an infant, and long before the “web” was envisioned, it presents a serious Christian critique of the underlying technologies and philosophies involved. The authors argue that “this drive for human autonomy and mastery apart from God and his will manifests itself in what we will call *technicism*. Technicism reduces all things to the technological; it sees technology as the solution to all human problems and needs. Technology is a savior, the means to make progress and gain mastery over modern, secularized cultural desires” (p. 49). This is also the theme of Jacques Ellul’s *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). See also David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 23–25 and passim (see the index).

⁵“A good long squint and some head-scratching directed at the emerging world of cyberspace may equip us to make some wise choices while we yet have choices to make. From a Christian perspective, such rumination is not merely an academic exercise: It forms the heart of biblical discipleship. Followers of Christ have always lived with the creative tension of being in, but not of, the world system. They are citizens of heaven, yet emissaries of Christ on earth. As such, their pattern of life must resist the corruption and coercion of sinful ways of life in order to honor their Sovereign.” And again, “This does not mean one must regard every new technology as the invincible advance of Antichrist or as another Tower of Babel. We need not be reactionary Luddites, who want to smash new technologies simply because they alter our forms of life. Human ingenuity in subduing creation, including technical facility, is part of what it means to be made in God’s image.” Later in his helpful book, Groothuis points out that “We should aim to be wise skeptics who realize that something is wrong with everything in a fallen world, that things are rarely as good as they seem initially, and that finite and fallen knowers can never accurately predict all the effects of a new mode of life” (Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, pp. 19, 20, 53). See also Chuck Colson, “Challenges of the Information Age,” *Breakpoint* transcript (1997), pp. 3–4.

⁶Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 13.

⁷There is seemingly no end to the topics that could have been included. Among some of the other significant issues that deserve consideration are the depersonalization that may come from cyberspace; the desire for disembodiment; issues of knowledge,

CYBERSPACE AND POSTMODERNITY

Cyberspace did not appear from nowhere on the late 20th century scene. It has long roots, both technological and philosophical. "The introduction of new technologies reflects previous philosophical trends, reinforces these trends in novel ways, and sparks the creation of new ideas and patterns of culture."⁸ The technical antecedents are obvious; the philosophical ones less so. I would suggest that cyberspace and postmodernity are closely intertwined.⁹ Only a brief sketch is attempted here.¹⁰

truth, and morality; "technoshamanism"; community; and "cyber sex." (Groothuis's book has valuable discussions of each of these topics.) The role of cyberspace technologies in education and the problems of fragmentia are also significant (on which see David Shenk, *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997], pp. 37, 59–76, and passim; also Postman, *The End of Education*, passim).

⁸Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 23.

⁹Slouka observes that cyberspace represents "the marriage of deconstruction and computer technology—a mating of monsters if ever there was one" (*War of the Worlds*, p. 33). (Deconstruction is the primary literary/philosophical *method* underlying the *system* of postmodernity.) As Slouka later explains, after summarizing the tenets of deconstructionism, "Like the deconstructionists, the cyberists were enamored of the concepts of indeterminacy and instability; like deconstructionists, they projected a fashionable, kaffeeklatsch nihilism; like their predecessors, finally, they were morally neuter, less interested in constructing truth and meaning—however provisionally—than in dismantling them. There was, however, one important difference. The deconstructionists had theories; the cyberists had machines. Theirs, in effect, was an *applied* deconstructionism. While the deconstructionists could only *argue* that nothing exists outside of us—that reality is just personal perspective—the cyberists had machines that could *make* it so" (pp. 35–36). "Poststructuralist literary theory...turns out to be just such another proleptic aesthetic; poststructuralism and the common digital code seem part of the same event" (Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993], p. xi).

¹⁰The essence of postmodernity is the rejection of any and all absolutes (except, of course, for the absolute that there are no absolutes!). There is no such thing as truth. Philosophical pluralism is the norm. This is not the same as what was sometimes referred to as relativism in the area of modernity, for then there *was* truth—it was just relative to the situation. Modernists believed in truth and so did Christians. They argued with each other as to which was correct: the biblical, supernatural worldview or the naturalistic worldview. For the postmodernist, there is not truth over which to argue. For a very helpful overview of postmodernity, see Rick Shrader, "The Church in the Postmodern Era," *The Baptist Bulletin*, Dec. 1998, pp. 23–26 or David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 46–50, 216–20. For longer, substantive discussions of postmodernity as a philosophical system (and no such treatment is intended or attempted in this essay), see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); David Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Wheaton: Victor, 1995); Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and*

In the biblical, theological realm, postmodernism rejects monotheism because it restricts our choices, our freedoms, our personal potential. Such restrictions are viewed as unhealthy because they cramp the soul and impede spiritual growth. As a result, postmodern philosophies cut the person free from any external reference point that can provide purpose and meaning in life—from a transcendent God, indeed from any transcendental significance. Instead there are only multiple uncertainties, random correlations on the waves of life's polymorphous variations as depersonalized creatures scabble through life on their own.¹¹ Apart from a biblical worldview that enables a coherent and meaningful perspective, human existence is hectic, confused, and meaningless. This has produced considerable anxiety among those thoughtful enough to contemplate life seriously.¹² Postmodernity has offered one way to deal with such uncertainties—it “simply bless[es] the chaos, countenance[s] the confusion, give[s] up on knowing who we really are, and embrace[s] a truth-less, perpetually uprooted existence.... [It] attempts to forge a philosophy...free from the need to discover natures, essences, or objective meanings.”¹³

The lack of absolutes and the resulting uncertainties may be seen, for example, in the widespread practice of employing assumed, fictional identities when traversing cyberspace, whether in the MOOs and MUDs or more pedestrian list serves and news groups.¹⁴ This results in a highly

the Postmodern World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and Gene Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

¹¹Cf. Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, pp. 28–30.

¹²Less thoughtful people simply flit from one pleasure to another—whether that pleasure is the latest movie, “religion,” a cold beer, a round of golf, sex, or any number of other temporary fillers, whether it be a simple pleasure or a more complex distraction.

¹³Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 24. These attitudes have impacted evangelical culture (in a pragmatic way, if not in verbalized theory) to a far greater extent than many have been willing to admit. In this regard, see David Wells's seminal discussions in *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) and *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

¹⁴MUD is an acronym for “Multiple User Dimension” (or, reflecting its Dungeons and Dragons forbear, “Multiple User Dungeon.” Roughly synonymous, MOO is short for “Multiple User Dimension, Object Oriented.” MUSH stands for “Multiple User Shared Hallucination.” All are computer simulation “games” that represent artificial “realms” in which participants interact via typed text. They are on-going, virtual worlds that “exist” on the Internet. They are far more extensive and elaborate than any more traditional role-playing game. Participants do not typically view themselves as playing a game but as inhabiting a different world during the time that they are on-line. See the descriptions and discussion, *passim*, in both Slouka, *War of the Worlds* and Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*.

fictional world.¹⁵ “Fictions are all we have left, and fictions are what we are. Of course, when the self traffics in nothing but fictions, the notion of truth as nourishment for the soul slips from our grasp.”¹⁶ Indeed, the soul itself is endangered by the soul of cyberspace. The digitopians applaud the virtual multiple personalities because “technology is rendering obsolete the belief in a single unified self.” The “norm” of some cyberspace communities is what was once classified as schizoid behavior. “The new breed of postmodern psychologists defines the healthy personality as one that constantly reinvents itself. People who have a stable, consistent personality are not viewed as healthy, but repressed. Since truth is relative, it’s considered neurotic to be tied down to enduring beliefs.”¹⁷

It is not just the philosophical literati who evidence such postmodern behavior. As Groothuis puts it,

Certain postmodernist ideas are fostered by computer technologies, causing these ideas to be appropriated by many who will never crack a book by postmodernist philosophers.... Someone may purchase a computer for reasons of efficiency or social status without realizing that ‘the medium is the message,’ that this particular extension of human endeavor is not neutral: it carries with it a propensity toward certain perspectives and experiences.¹⁸

Unsuspecting consumers who become “newbies” on the net easily assume that such fictional identities and anonymity are the norm, the right way to interact with others in cyberspace. The use of fictional names is even encouraged on the web, especially by privacy advocates.¹⁹ Too frequently Christians never question the philosophical and psychological implications of such practices.²⁰

¹⁵See the secular analysis by Mark Slouka (note especially the subtitle): *War of the Worlds: Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality*. The “worlds” to which the title refers are the real world in which we live and the virtual reality worlds of cyberspace.

¹⁶Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 27, see also pp. 24–27. “Artificial reality is the authentic postmodern condition, and virtual reality its definitive technological expression” (Benjamin Woolley, *Virtual Worlds* [NY: Penguin, 1992], p. 169, as cited by Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 27). “No state of existence typifies postmodernism better than ‘virtual reality.’ Since our existence has no meaning and we are not connected to history or its values by any binding truths, no one can be quite sure where reality and nonreality start and stop” (Shrader, “Postmodern Era,” p. 25).

¹⁷Colson, “Challenges,” pp. 12–14.

¹⁸Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 28.

¹⁹For example, Matt Lake, “Stealth Surfing,” *PC World*, June 2000, pp. 121–24, 126, 132, 134, 136. Much of Lake’s advice is good and helpful in reducing spam, but a Christian should think twice about creating bogus identities and fictional names for use online.

²⁰I would strongly urge you never to post anonymous or pseudonymous messages on-line. If you are not comfortable being personally identified with and being

The (often multiple) fictional identities in cyberspace; the morphing technology of the computer; the random, nonlinear associations of hypertext epistemology; the page-hopping eclecticism of the web-based search engines; the ethics-crushing superficiality of disembodied communication of the net (often resulting in “flaming”)²¹—whether in the usenet groups, list serves, bulletin boards, chat rooms, or email—and other aspects of the Internet reflect and magnify the ambiguities and relativism of postmodernity.²²

CYBERSPACE AND THE BOOK

Cyberspace stands in sharp contrast to the book.²³ The book is linear.²⁴ Its very nature affects how and what we understand—and so does the nature of cyberspace. But they are very different. The communication medium employed shapes the message: “the medium is the message” is true, whether one accepts all the details of McLuhan’s communications theory or not. There are inherent characteristics in the very medium that *do affect* both *what* can be communicated and *how* it is communicated. Technology is *not* neutral.²⁵

accountable for what you have to say, then don’t say it.

²¹“Wherever anonymity increases, accountability diminishes” (Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, p. 10).

²²It would be going too far to suggest that either of these two entities (the Internet/cyberspace and postmodernity) produced the other. Rather they should be seen as complementary systems that feed on and reinforce each other.

²³Perhaps, since the term *book* has become a favorite cyberspace analogy for other things, I should specify that I am talking here about the traditional, “printed and bound” version.

²⁴Those who are committed to digitopian views of cyberspace and hypertext freely acknowledge the contrasting linearity of the book. For example, Negroponte says that “while a book may be randomly accessible and your eyes may browse quite haphazardly, it is nonetheless forever fixed by the confines of three physical dimensions” (*Being Digital*, p. 69). His point that a book may be accessed in random fashion is true, but does not challenge the linear nature of the book. Some books may well be designed for such access (e.g., reference volumes, lexicons, cookbooks, poetry anthologies, etc.), but the classic concept of the book is that of linear exposition. Even those intended for more random reference still contain a high degree of linearity, both within the individual articles and in their overall organization (usually topical or alphabetical topologies). All this changes markedly in cyberspace.

²⁵“Technology is never a neutral force: it orders our behavior, redefines our values, reconstitutes our lives in ways we can’t always predict” (Slouka, *War of the Worlds*, p. 8). “The forms of communication...[and] how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what idea we can conveniently express” (Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* [New York: Penguin, 1985], p. 6; see also *passim*). “Every technology has an inherent bias. It has within its physical form a predisposition toward being used in certain ways and not others. Only those who know

Television, for example, molds and shapes what we understand from a message and even how we view our world as we peer through its lens. Likewise the technology of cyberspace. Staring into its glassy face affects the shape of the message transmitted, the receiver, and the transmitter in unexpected (and often unhelpful) ways. The book differs from both television and the Internet in significant ways—ways that impact the nature of Christianity.

Christianity, as Judaism before it, is a revealed religion. Its base is in revelation. From the first recorded revelation of God and his will to humanity—inscribed in stone by the finger of God²⁶—to the Torah, to the completed OT, to the incarnational revelation of the Son, to the writings which comprise our Greek testament, all assume propositional truth as the essence of communication.²⁷ We have a worldview that is almost exclusively text-based.²⁸

The record of the earliest communication between God and his creatures describes a verbal communication. God created Adam in his image, able to reason and speak propositional, rational content. This logic and rationality is what distinguishes human from beast. In the course of human history, God continued to direct his people by means

nothing of the history of technology believe that a technology is entirely neutral" (ibid., p. 84).

²⁶"With this divine action, the Creator forever dignified the written word" (Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 57). It is true that the book of Job references *events* much earlier than Sinai (an argument can be made that Job may even have been *pre-Abrahamic*), but this does not challenge the antecedence of the Ten Words and the Pentateuch as written, canonical revelation. I suspect (but cannot, of course, demonstrate) that the Job story was transmitted orally for quite some time. When it was first written and at what point it was accepted as revelatory cannot be known from the information that we have.

²⁷This is not to imply that the Bible is a book of doctrinal statements, but that all God's inscripturated truth is couched in words, whether their genre be that of narrative, poem, dirge, lament, parable, letter, homily, treatise, etc.

²⁸This has always been true, even at times when God's revelation was transmitted orally, for example, Jesus' teachings prior to the first written gospel, or perhaps portions of the OT prior to their inscripturation. In each of these instances, however, we are still dealing with "text" (i.e., verbal revelation, propositions) whether in written or oral forms. Likewise in Judaism the text held the supreme place. "Despite the well-documented reliance of Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism upon oral tradition, at the time of Christian beginnings Judaism was in no sense a nonliterary or unliterary culture. It was one of the most broadly literate of ancient societies with a long and rich written tradition. Judaism valued its texts as the authoritative cultural heritage of the nation—at once religious, moral, social, and aesthetic. Although Jewish tradition was not wholly reduced to written form, it was the written form that was most revered. By the time Christianity emerged, the oral tradition of Judaism was essentially a secondary growth upon texts that held a classical and normative status" (Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995], p. 19).

of propositional statements expressed in human language so as to enable obedience.

Eventually portions of this revelation were codified in written form. Moses' authorial work, whether tediously chiseling stone tablets (in preparation for the replacement of the broken record of the Ten Words) or inking a leather scroll, was a *written* record. Though portions (perhaps even large portions) of the completed record may have been transmitted orally, the canonical form has always been preserved and transmitted in written form, despite the lack of mechanized or automated means of making the copies requisite to preserving this text.²⁹

With the coming of the Son as the ultimate revelation of God, revelation continued to be verbal in its nature. Granted that Jesus also performed visual-based signs (just as God had done for Israel on numerous occasions), only his verbal explanations were authoritative expressions of the truth intended. Jesus himself is not said to have written anything.³⁰ His message, however, was *written* by his followers.³¹ It is this (highly selective) written record that inscripturates God's truth for his people.³²

Although numerous copies of the older testament had undoubtedly been made prior to the first century, it was the missionary enterprise of the early church that spurred the reproduction of thousands of copies of

²⁹This emphasis contrasts with that of some who argue for the priority of the oral form presumed to lie under the canonical form. (Form and redaction criticism have similarities with such an argument.) Harley suggests that "*only* by using the oral and visual powers of the electronic media can the original thrust of many passages be conveyed in their truest import" ("New Media for Communicating the Bible: The Potential and the Problems," in *The Bible in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. H. Kee, pp. 159–78 [New York: American Bible Society, 1993], p. 168). This approach surrenders the authority of an inscripturated text for the (largely subjective) reconstruction of the presumed oral original.

³⁰Apart from the apocryphal account of John 8—and that in the ephemeral medium of sand. He may, of course, have written any number of things in unrecorded situations; if so, none have been preserved.

³¹Jesus' message was transmitted orally, but the only authoritative form was the later inscripturation of this in the gospels. For example, Peter recounted Jesus' life and teaching for the believers in Rome, but Mark later recorded Peter's sermons in what was probably the first written gospel (see Papias's account of this as preserved in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.15).

³²"Among the many religious movements of antiquity, only Christianity and Judaism produced much literature at all. Greek and Roman religions appear to have been largely indifferent to the use of texts. Although particular items...have been found, they do not occur in connection with a particular cult or in a quantity that would justify speaking of a religious literature.... No Greco-Roman religious group produced, used, or valued texts on a scale comparable to Judaism and Christianity" (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, p. 18).

the Scriptures (including both testaments). It is not insignificant that Christianity is today described as a religion of the Book,³³ for despite its OT origin in scroll form, it is highly likely that the preparation and reproduction of those writings which constituted the Greek testament (and later its Latin dress) were the principal cause for the widespread adoption of the codex form.³⁴ This new form of inscribing texts, the book, engendered a much greater quantity of textual materials, and that whether they continued to be hand copied one MS at a time or whether they were later mass produced in scriptoria (the forerunner of the printing press and the photocopier).³⁵ When movable type was introduced by Gutenberg, there was an explosion of literary study as the book became sufficiently inexpensive for ordinary people to own such items.

Christian communities, though they were not more literate than society at large, and indeed were probably less so, were nevertheless strongly oriented toward the written word. For Christians, texts were not entertainments or dispensable luxuries, but the essential instruments of Christian life. One cannot imagine a Christian community in antiquity, even the earliest, that would not have relied upon texts, for like the Jewish synagogue, the literature of the faith was part of the *raison d'être* of the community. Texts had a constitutive and regulative importance for Christian thought and action. This was preeminently and primitively true for the scriptural texts that Christianity appropriated from Judaism. It was hardly less true of those specifically Christian documents that were soon written for the instruction and administration of fledgling congregations by early Christian missionaries, and, later, those written in the service of communication and support among small, scattered churches in a large, unsympathetic, and hostile social environment. Unlike every other religious movement in the Roman world save Judaism and perhaps Orphism, Christianity was constitutionally oriented to texts. Though not every Christian could read, every Christian

³³"Christians and Jews are 'people of the Book' because they believe God revealed his truth to the varied writers of Scripture in words that ought to be conserved, understood, and obeyed" (Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 57).

³⁴Of the surviving 5,500+ MSS, only a very few (viz., p¹², 13, 18, 22) are in scroll form. The remaining are all in book/codex form. There are several possible reasons for this. Those most frequently cited include the fact that more information could be included and the volume still kept to a manageable size; it was cheaper since both sides were used; and it was easier to use, especially when trying to find a specific text. See Kurt and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 75–76, 102. Gamble has an extensive, fascinating discussion of this issue and proposes different (and persuasive) reasons for the dominance of the codex form in early Christianity, largely related to the use of informal notebooks for correspondence such as Paul's letters (*Books and Readers*, pp. 49–66).

³⁵Gamble challenges the traditional assumptions regarding the mass production of manuscripts in scriptoriums, suggesting that this was not a normal practice (*ibid.*, pp. 88–90). His arguments deserve further study.

regularly heard reading.... Books were essential to the ordinary life of a Christian congregation. Christians had a standing need for them, and produced, procured, and employed them accordingly.³⁶

Throughout the history recounted briefly above the focus was on the verbal text, whether in scroll or codex form or in the later form of the printed book. Despite the technological innovations of codex, scriptorium, and printing press, the differences in the communication medium were minor. "Whenever language is the principal medium of communication—especially language controlled by the rigors of print—an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result."³⁷ Since writing does make a claim, the reader is involved in a serious, rational process. The very character of text encourages (indeed, demands) rationality and sequence.

The order of print is linear, and is bound to the logic of the imperatives of syntax. Syntax is the substance of discourse, a mapping of the ways that the mind makes sense through language. Print communication requires the active engagement of the reader's attention, for reading is fundamentally an act of translation. Symbols are turned into their verbal referents and these in turn interpreted.... Print also possesses a time axis; the turning of pages, not to mention the vertical descent down the page, is a forward-moving succession, with earlier contents at every point serving as a ground for what follows. Moreover the printed material is static—it is the reader, not the book, that moves forward.³⁸

Is it any wonder, then, that the postmodern deconstructionist objects to the concept of the book? A book implies an author, unity, and closure—all anathema to modern literary critics who focus on empowering the reader. For such critics, "what we find is that 'the book' symbolizes the 'idol of determinancy,' the illusion that texts have fixed meanings."³⁹ Christianity, as a religion of the Book, represents all that postmodernity despises, for the Book of Books implies an Author.

"The implications of devaluing verbal communication cut at the heart of a biblical worldview. God has chosen language as an integral

³⁶Ibid, p. 141.

³⁷Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, p. 50. As he wryly adds, "Though one may accomplish it from time to time, it is very hard to say nothing when employing a written English sentence."

³⁸Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 122, as cited by Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 54. See also Blobaum's review of this book at <<http://ccatt.upenn.edu/jod/texts/birkerts.review.html>> and Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, pp. 50–51.

³⁹Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 104.

mode of self-revelation. If the verbal is no longer important, where does that leave Scripture?"⁴⁰ "The book, that stubbornly unelectric artifact of pure typography, possesses resources conducive to the flourishing of the soul. A thoughtful reading of the printed text orients one to a world of order, meaning, and the possibility of knowing truth."⁴¹ Indeed, the concept of the book is a theological concept.⁴²

CYBERSPACE AND TELEVISION

The twentieth century has produced several major distractions from the text—challenges to the dominance of both the book and the very concept of textuality as it has traditionally been known. The first such

⁴⁰William E. Brown, "Theology in a Postmodern Culture: Implications of a Video-Dependent Society," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism*, ed. D. Dockery (Wheaton: Victor, 1995), p. 319.

⁴¹Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 74. Although not the focus of this essay, it would be worth reflecting on how this has impacted preaching. For some suggestive thoughts, note Postman's observations on the preaching of Jonathan Edwards: "He did not speak to his audiences extemporaneously. He *read* his sermons, which were tightly knit and closely reasoned expositions of theological doctrine. Audiences may have been moved emotionally by Edwards language, but they were, first and foremost, required to understand it" (*Amusing Ourselves*, p. 54). His point here is to contrast the typical preaching of the 18th–19th C. (still part of the Age of Typography) with that of our own time (the Age of Entertainment/Television). That this comes from a Jewish writer who is generally atheistic makes the observation even more interesting. Postman is a discerning observer of our culture.

Jim Ehrhard has recently argued strongly and convincingly against the caricature of Edwards as a manuscript preacher ("A Critical Analysis of the Tradition of Jonathan Edwards as a Manuscript Preacher," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60 [Spring 1998]: 71–84). Even given this challenge of Postman's assumption, his point is still valid: there is a significant difference between the preaching of the Age of Typography and much of the preaching in the Age of Entertainment. Shrader's observation regarding the use of stories in contemporary preaching is also interesting and relevant at this point. He notes that stories are the preferred homiletical genre when addressing "busters" since no one can say that the story isn't true. Shrader wisely points out, however, that the flip side is that "neither can anyone say your story *is* true!" ("The Church in the Postmodern Era," paper presented to the Rocky Mountain Association of Regular Baptist Churches, 19–20 March 1998, Pueblo, Colorado, p. 12 [note that this is a longer version of the *Baptist Bulletin* article by the same title referenced above]).

⁴²"The 'book' is therefore a theological idea, insofar as it implies that there is a single unified meaning and a comprehensive order. Any claim that a text can be totalized (e.g., interpreted as a unified whole) is thus a 'theological' claim: 'The word "theological" pertains, then, to the use of any vocabulary in which meaning or being is said to be wholly resolved by reference to an origin, end, center or ground.'"* Conversely, Derrida's claim that 'there is nothing outside the text' is profoundly anti-theological" (Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* p. 105 [*The embedded quote is from Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), p. 32]).

challenge was the medium of television; the second is cyberspace. The dominance of cyberspace builds on the preparatory role of television—the analog forerunner to the digital messiah of the web. A brief look in that direction will help evaluate the current technological situation.

Building on the invention of the telegraph and the photograph in the nineteenth century, television introduced what Postman calls the “peek-a-boo world.” Here,

this event, now that pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child’s game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with playing peek-a-boo. And there is nothing wrong with entertainment. As some psychiatrist once put it, we all build castles in the air. The problems come when we try to *live* in them.⁴³

And live in them we do. The world of images of which television consists has become home to most citizens of the 20th century western world. It is the “command center of the new epistemology” in the sense that public understanding of every aspect of our lives is now largely mediated and shaped by television. Other media remain, but television has become the meta-medium that influences how we perceive and use any “lesser” medium—indeed, *how* we know.⁴⁴

Those who have grown up in such an environment may find this

⁴³Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, p. 77. It will be obvious in this section that I have leaned heavily on what I consider to be a most astute analysis of the subject by Postman. I would strongly urge a careful and thoughtful reading of his entire book. See also Brown, “Theology in a Postmodern Culture,” pp. 318–19; J. Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, pp. 332–39; and Mike Stallard, “Communicating the Gospel to a Biblically Illiterate Culture,” Baptist Bible Seminary faculty forum paper, 3 April 1998, pp. 5–7. None of these strike the tone of many early critiques of television by fundamentalists. Though their intentions and impressions were probably correct in many ways, most of them did not address the real underlying issues, being content with such surface matters as profanity and immorality in the programming. The works referenced above address the nature of the medium and its social implications. This, in my opinion, is where the more basic issue lies. Shenk points out that “it isn’t so much the content of the messages that should worry us as much as their ubiquity, and it is critical to realize that information doesn’t have to be unwanted and unattractive to be harmful” (*Data Smog*, p. 32). Although it does not focus specifically on television, a Christian critique of similar issues may be found in Kenneth Myers, *All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989).

⁴⁴Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, pp. 78–79. David Wells notes that “television is perhaps less a window on the world than a surrogate eye that preselects what images of the world we will be exposed to” (*God in the Wasteland*, p. 9).

description rather odd, but I would suggest that it is only because television is so natural that it is a given in their worldview—the significance of which can be comprehended only with considerable difficulty. But as Postman suggests, “there is no more disturbing consequence of the electronic and graphic revolution than this: that the world as given to us through television seems natural, not bizarre.... We have so thoroughly accepted its definitions of truth, knowledge, and reality that irrelevance seems to us to be filled with import, and incoherence seems eminently sane.”⁴⁵

Why is this true? The basis for this description of television is based on the fact that the medium of American television is totally devoted to the genre of entertainment, to “show biz.” No matter what the subject matter, from the most terrifying news story to the most significant religious matter,⁴⁶ it all comes across the screen in an entertaining fashion. That is the nature of the beast. It can do no other.

[Television] has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience. Our television set keeps us in constant communion with the world, but it does so with a face whose smiling countenance is unalterable. The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.... Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television.⁴⁷

Television programming is not designed to be read or to be heard, but to be seen. Producers have no choice but to do so since they work with a medium totally dominated by the image, not by thinking (which is not a “performing art”). Content must be subordinated to the visual impact of the images to be displayed.⁴⁸ Images inherently can only depict particulars, concrete representation, not ideas or abstracts. The visual lexicon has no categories for concepts. Truth and falsity cannot be discussed in these terms.⁴⁹ Pictures have no syntax, no logic, no ability to convey

⁴⁵Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, pp. 79–80.

⁴⁶Postman has some sobering observations on the subject of religion and television (*ibid.*, pp. 114–24). Despite his theological perspective, his analysis is worth contemplating. For a brief summary: “On television, God is a vague and subordinate character. Though His name is invoked repeatedly, the concreteness and persistence of the image of the preacher carries the message that it is he, not He, who must be worshipped.... Television is, after all, a form of graven imagery far more alluring than a golden calf” (p. 122).

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 83–98.

⁴⁹Specific instances may perhaps be illustrated this way, but without context and exposition, there is no real discussion. As Brown argues, “moral arguments and epistemological considerations have no place in the world of television. True, false, good, bad

propositions. They have no grammar, no oblique moods with which to contemplate or command or conclude—all is uninterpreted aorist indicative. These are the negatives of the visual image. There is a positive (if it may be called that). The image *can* isolate and fragment. It can depict situations apart from their context. It can juxtapose them with images of other situations that do not necessarily have any logical or historical relationship to each other. It can atomize and dismember reality.⁵⁰ The essence of television is an unending kaleidoscope of stunning, compelling images with a smidgen of verbiage allowed to peek out of the cracks.

It is not too extreme to say that “embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news story is a theory of anticomunication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction.”⁵¹ That is true of nearly everything that professes substance on the screen. Because entertainment has become the *de facto* genre for news, the American public has become the best entertained but poorest informed people of Western civilization, for they have lost their sense of what it means to know something.⁵²

are the stuff of language and ideas, not visual images. In a video-dependent society, moral decisions are emotive not rational, not based on reasons or principles but on existential ecstasy or terror. The result is an increasing inability to discuss significant issues in a meaningful way.... The visual does not supplement language, it displaces it” (“Theology in a Postmodern Culture,” p. 318).

⁵⁰Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, pp. 72–74.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 105.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 106–7. For a rather different perspective on television than that presented here, see Gary Rowe, “Publishing Words and Images: Schools and Learning in the Millennial Shift,” in *From One Medium to Another: Basic Issues for Communicating the Scriptures in New Media*, ed. R. Hodgson and P. Soukup, pp. 21–35 (New York: American Bible Society, 1997). Rowe recognizes the culture-shaping role of television, though his evaluation of that shaping is considerably more positive than Postman’s (Rowe’s is almost naively simplistic). To argue that viewers control television might be an expected defense mechanism from a former CNN executive, but it is hardly realistic. It is not encouraging to see such an essay in a Bible Society volume exploring the communication of God’s Word. It is, however, consistent with ABS projects to *translate* (their term) Scripture texts into other media, including film, drama, and multimedia. These attempts are an extreme form of dynamic equivalence (in the original and technical sense of that term [attempts to produce the *same effect* as the original])—not what I would define as functional equivalence). For example, J. Werner’s essay, “Musical *Mimesis* for Modern Media” (in *From One Medium to Another: Basic Issues for Communicating the Scriptures in New Media*, ed. Paul A. Soukup and Robert Hodgson [Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997], pp. 221–27), assumes that the recreation of biblical events is *superior* to their written record; the reduction of these “experiences” to “a written lexical medium” is “unfortunate.”

CYBERSPACE AND HYPERTEXT

But then comes cyberspace and hypertext.⁵³ Moving from the analog screen to digital hypertext results in promises of extraordinary blessings: rapid access to enormous volumes of information,⁵⁴ cross-referencing, free association of material formally separated by the book format, etc.⁵⁵ Although the new media incorporate verbal texts, no longer is the presentation linear, "bound to the logic of the imperatives of syntax." The reader no longer concentrates on text and logical argument. The temporal orientation is no longer forward-moving. The text is no longer static.⁵⁶ The visual image has become primary. Text is auxiliary and ancillary.⁵⁷ Even when text *is* employed, it has a very different

⁵³Do not take my generally negative assessment in this section to be a total rejection of the web (indeed, I have a fairly extensive set of my own web pages: <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/>>) or even of hypertext in some restrained forms—and certainly not of computer technology in general. This section analyzes the extreme, postmodern use of hypertext (of which the web is only one form). I will suggest later that the web can be a valid forum for truth, but it must be used wisely and with due regard to its nature and limitations. I would perhaps not go quite so far as the following statement by Steve Jobs (CEO of Apple Computer), but there is some truth to it since content can be emphasized on the web in a way that is not possible via television: "The Internet is a place you go when you want to turn your brain on, and a television is a place where you go when you want to turn your brain off" ("There's Sanity Returning," *Business Week*, 25 May 98; <<http://www.businessweek.com/1998/21/b3579165.htm>>).

⁵⁴This glut of information (much of it just plain wrong) deserves careful attention. I simply do not have the space or time in this article to even begin to suggest all the related issues. For a very terse summary, see Colson, "Challenges," pp. 17–19; at much greater length, see Shenk, *Data Smog*.

⁵⁵James O'Donnell argues that hypertext is only a faster form of the non-linear (?) codex and such things as the Eusebian canons, indexes, etc. (*Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998], pp. 62–63). In this regard, O'Donnell is both downplaying the linear argument of the codex and also thinking of hypertext in a slightly different and more limited form than what I am assuming in this essay, describing how a reader accesses material created (and linked) by one individual author rather than as a reader-created (or additional-author-created) activity. As often, the issue is not totally one of the technical capabilities involved, but in how they are used.

⁵⁶"The physical character of printed documents requires that some parts of the document immutably precede others, although there is no necessary reason the reader must negotiate a printed document in this order. Electronic writing releases readers and writers from an immutable order, although not from the project of ordering as a component of meaning-making" (Phil Mullins, "Media Ecology and the New Literacy: Notes on an Electronic Hermeneutic," in *From One Medium to Another: Basic Issues for Communicating the Scriptures in New Media*, ed. Paul A. Soukup and Robert Hodgson [Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997], p. 306).

⁵⁷"The invasion of the verbal realm by images results in role reversal and domination...: the humiliation of the word." Or again, "In the audiovisual realm, the image is king. The word, practically useless, is in any case a serf, not an equal" (J. Ellul, *The*

function and it can no longer be viewed the same way.⁵⁸ There is no substance to the text. It appears and disappears on the screen, suggesting its incorporeality and ephemeral nature. This contrasts sharply with the book whose pages are “literally stained with meaning.”⁵⁹ True, there are binary digits somewhere, whether on a disk of some sort or in RAM, but an individual no longer has direct access to that text. We are now at the level of machine-mediated textuality.⁶⁰ Except for television, this change in medium is far more dramatic than the previous shifts in technology that have maintained the priority of the text and its logical development.

There have been some useful implementations and uses for computer-enabled, hyper-text systems. Yet there are dangers inherent in the very nature of this medium. The primary danger of such technology is the loss of context and linear argument. Hypertext “is especially potent in its ability to fragment literary meaning and textual authority.” Without a contextual framework it “may corrode a sense of coherence and meaning.”⁶¹ This does not faze the postmodernist, for whom these textual characteristics are negative categories anyway, but it suggests some troubling implications for a biblical view of the text.⁶²

Humiliation of the Word [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], pp. 155, 218). Ellul’s analysis is wide-ranging, including not only the Word in a theological sense (i.e., Scripture), but the word in general (i.e., human language). There is a neo-orthodox dichotomy that runs through his writings, but he has, nevertheless, some significant things to say about this “humiliation of the word” (see esp. pp. 8–9, 36, 42, 71, 114–20, 127–33 for a brief synopsis).

⁵⁸“The word, although prevalent in our day, has lost its *reasoning value*, and has value only as an accessory to images. In turn, the word actually evokes images” (ibid., p. 210).

⁵⁹Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 57.

⁶⁰The long-term complications of such electronic mediation are significant. The usability of such documents/data is extremely short lived—far briefer than that of a printed document which, on high quality paper, survives for centuries. Computers, storage media, operating systems, and software, have life spans that are usually measured in years—years that can be counted on one’s fingers. As hardware and software standards and formats change, the accessibility of older information becomes increasingly fragile. I personally have 400K single-sided 3.5” floppy disks that are not readable by any computer in current production, just as many others have 360K 5.25” disks—and both of these formats are only about 10 years old; larger floppies, computer tape, and punch cards are even older. For a brief discussion of some of these problems, see Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, pp. 61–63 and Laura Tangle, “Whoops, There Goes Another CD-ROM,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 16 Feb. 1998, pp. 67–68.

⁶¹Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 65.

⁶²Mullins points out that “it seems likely that a step deeper into electronic culture will shift the present polarized discussion regarding canons. Great and inescapable books, even sacred texts like the Bible, have heretofore depended in part for their status upon the physical discreteness and stolidity of texts” (“Media Ecology,” p. 320, see also pp. 329–31). For an example of the uncritical optimism of multi-media, hypertext advocates

No longer can an author assume that a reader will necessarily encounter the text in a single sequence and fashion. Texts on the web are routinely browsed in a hop-scotch fashion—indeed that is the origin of the terminology “web”—a pastiche of links from a multitude of sites and authors cross-linked in an incredibly diverse fashion. These links do not necessarily follow a logical presentation of the subject matter since they run both forwards and backwards (losing linearity) and have no specific starting point. A surfer may plunge into the web at any point, traverse hundreds and thousands of links, and exit thousands of miles from his starting point without ever reading a complete page or document, without ever seeing the introduction to the material, and without ever being bothered to understand the logical connections between any of the links. “The soul in cyberspace may easily habituate itself to browsing, data-surfing, and skimming in exchange for analysis, reflection, and discourse.”⁶³

The same thing is true whether hypertext is implemented on the web or on a CD. By design there is very little sequence. A user jumps around as he or she sees fit and accesses text and image at whatever point seems convenient. It becomes

“an egoless supertext” of assorted textual patches, sound bites, and images. The idea of one author is absorbed by the technological functions.... Digitally glorified blurbs replace discourse. The immediacy of sensory stimulation replaces the time and effort required to wrest meaning from an inert text.

Discourse is the intellectual process whereby we attend to linguistic meaning, pursue possible interpretations, compare arguments, and come to conclusions of various intellectual strengths. The tendency of the

(though I do not know if he is justly labeled a postmodernist), see Rowe, “Publishing Words and Images.” This is a utopian vision of what Rowe’s company (multimedia education) thinks that they can provide as a replacement for old-fashioned, primitive, ineffective things called “books.” It is almost an exact opposite of Postman’s evaluation of the same issues, but Rowe never considers any of these objections (and never mentions Postman). It is more like a commercial than an essay—though it is inconsistently framed in text in a printed book! If Rowe really thought that books were so “bad,” he would never have written this essay but would rather have crafted a multimedia piece that would have accomplished his objectives so much more effectively! (Irony intended!) Throughout the essay, Rowe reflects little appreciation for authority, let alone truth and logic (or sin and depravity). Linear thought, chronological sequence, etc. are viewed as highly negative—but that is because he has *assumed* television to be the standard and conformed his views of the world to fit the capabilities/limits of the medium. He never asks if the technology implies limits or how the technology affects our understanding of facts/reality (on which, see Postman). Rowe seems to think that children turned loose without any direction, but with enough technology, will educate themselves. While they might very well *amuse* themselves, it is highly doubtful that they would ever obtain any semblance of education.

⁶³Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 67.

CD-ROM is to undermine discourse and replace it with a kind of information distraction. As we surf from node to node, we get the impression that we have learned something. But because most CD-ROMs are so visually oriented, they do not teach the discipline of reasoned discourse.

... Analysis is paralyzed by the domination of randomly selected images.... Granted these realities, interactive CD-ROMs will lean toward the entertaining and away from the educational. While encouraging digital tourism, they tend to discourage the development of skills in careful reading and writing.⁶⁴

Bible software poses similar problems.⁶⁵ The technical abilities of software such as Logos, BibleWorks, and Accordance enable people to do word searches that result in a string of texts that contain the same word or phrase. But such a list says nothing about the textual relationships that exist between these separate fragments. The software encourages the user to ignore the original contexts and to be content with mere “pearl stringing” and “catch word” associations that are more akin to some ancient approaches to Scripture than to anything resembling legitimate exegesis.⁶⁶ We end up “jigsawing Scripture” on the basis of the “info-chunks” that result from such searches. But “information retrieval is not synonymous with handling the truth wisely. Since computers cannot discern meaning, we cannot expect them to deliver wisdom.”⁶⁷

Such hypertext features, of course, are considered to be significant advantages by advocates of the technology, but they raise troubling questions if the same methodology is applied to the Bible. The biblical text presents a holistic, consistent worldview that has linearity (textually, historically, and theologically). To understand the concept of *eine*

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 66–67.

⁶⁵In this regard, see Mike Stallard, “Dangers in Using Computers to Interpret the Bible and Use It for Ministry,” <http://faculty.bbc.edu/mstallard/Biblical_Studies/Computers/Dangers.html> and Harry Hahne, “Interpretive Implications of Using Bible-Search Software for New Testament Grammatical Analysis,” <<http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/chorus/bible/essays/ntgram.html>>.

⁶⁶“Pearl stringing” is a term that is often used to describe some ancient Jewish forms of “exegesis.” The “catch words” referenced may at times play a significant role in tracking the literary structure of the passage (note, e.g., Mark 9:36–50), but the problem alluded to above is that Bible search software now encourages such associations *without regard to their literary context*. Words and phrases from divergent texts are now brought together in the assumption that this somehow facilitates understanding.

⁶⁷Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 146. He goes on to point out that “the cut-and-paste method ignores the need to understand the Bible as a whole, instead of focusing on superficial interpretations of isolated texts. Hypertext biblical software may well accentuate this unfortunate tendency and further remove us from the Bible’s own meaning.” And again, “with an array of Bible facts before us, all neatly categorized by our software, we may be mesmerized into thinking that we have mastered the Scriptures when we have mastered only the software (or at least part of it)” (pp. 146, 147).

gesamtbiblische Theologie ("a whole Bible biblical theology") that is inherent in this textual corpus, both the original author and setting as well as the textual context is absolutely essential so far as they can be known from the text.⁶⁸ The unitary author is the source of meaning of a text, but this sense is easily lost in a hypertext environment.⁶⁹ It is both irresponsible and inaccurate (if not blasphemous) to treat texts either in isolation from their contexts or in new and different contexts that do not respect and reflect the original author's contextual intent.⁷⁰ As Pascal put it, "anyone who wishes to give the meaning of Scripture without taking it from Scripture is the enemy of Scripture."⁷¹

In the context of biblical studies (including homiletics), the message of the text must be the message proclaimed, whether in commentary, theology, or sermon. In hypertext, as too frequently in homiletics, "a pastiche of relative and subjective meanings replaces the unitary fabric of discoverable truth. Texts forfeit their weight and bearing, become uprooted, and float adrift in the arbitrary atmosphere of cyberspace."⁷² The use of texts, especially biblical texts, with a meaning other than the contextual meaning of that text, though common to be sure, is totally and always an illegitimate perversion of the text despite the pious shell that may be wrapped around such a travesty. Such a method denies the authority of Scripture regardless of the lip service that the perpetrator may render to such authority.

C. S. Lewis saw this problem in literary criticism—how much more true of the Word of God:

Many of the comments on life which people get out of Shakespeare could have been reached by very moderate talents without his assistance. For another, it may well impede future receptions of the work itself. We may go back to it chiefly to find further confirmation for our belief that it teaches this or that, rather than for a fresh immersion in what it is. We shall be like a man poking his fire, not to boil the kettle or warm the room, but in the

⁶⁸A significant number of biblical texts are formally anonymous (e.g., Ruth or Hebrews). Despite such anonymity, however, the intent of the author as recorded in the text is essential. Other portions have no specificity as to their date or historical setting (e.g., Job or Joel). In such instances one cannot foist an artificial setting on the text, but neither may one transpose the text to an obviously foreign context and setting.

⁶⁹Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 68.

⁷⁰This statement applies to any attempt to discuss the meaning of a text, i.e., an expository use of the text. It is true not just of biblical texts but of any text. The principles spelled out here do not relate to such literary allusions that merely pick up the memorable wording of an author without professing to elicit the context and meaning involved.

⁷¹Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Section XIV: Appendix: Polemical Fragments, 900, <<http://ccel.wheaton.edu/p/pascal/pensees/pensees15.htm>>.

⁷²Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 69.

hope of seeing in it the same pictures he saw yesterday. And since the text is “but a cheverel glove” to a determined critic—since everything can be a symbol, or an irony, or an ambiguity—we shall easily find what we want. The supreme objection to this is that which lies against the popular use of all the arts. We are so busy doing things with the work that we give it too little chance to work on us. Thus increasingly we meet only ourselves.⁷³

As Groothuis suggests, all that remains of a text treated in hypertext fashion is “a smirk or a wink, but no face”—the Cheshire cat of postmodernity.⁷⁴

CYBERSPACE AND THE CHURCH

Let me suggest two instances that illustrate the nature of this problem in contemporary attempts to communicate the text. Both involve technologies or methods that existed prior to the discovery of cyberspace, but they have either been influenced by the new medium (and probably by the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernity) or have had previous shortcomings magnified by the new cultural context in which they are now utilized.

A Current Textbook

Cyberspace-related issues may be seen in some contemporary evangelical textbooks. Despite their bookish form, they are decidedly hypertextual in design. The content of these new volumes may well be orthodox, but their typography is decidedly postmodern. As an example, consider the recently-released volume by Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). It is a slick publication from its glossy paper, to the profuse full-color photographs and illustrations, to the included CD. The preface acknowledges that the book is pitched directly to modern students who are more oriented to the visual than the verbal. The features that are aimed at this audience include the multimedia CD, copious illustrations, sidebars, focus boxes, etc. The effect is to de-emphasize the main text and

⁷³C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 84–85. A “cheverel glove” refers to a glove made of kid leather—which is “noted for its pliancy and capability of being stretched” (*OED*, s.v.).

⁷⁴Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 71. This section should not be construed to imply that if the text of the Bible is transferred to digital form that it is no longer authoritative Scripture just because it is not in book form. The burden here is the impact of the medium on our *conception* of such a text. In a hypothetical (and at this time unimaginable) situation in which there were *no* printed form of the Bible it could still be said with confidence that a digital form of the text was, indeed, the Word of God.

focus attention on the glitzy visuals.⁷⁵ Likewise the CD opens with a lively, sound-and-animation “commercial” and provides more than 70 QuickTime movies and a wide range of slides/screens with rather elementary content—none of which (at least of the many that I viewed) present material in any way that is not possible (and probably equally effective) with more traditional print. If anything, it takes considerably longer to cover the same amount of material than with printed text. The QuickTime videos sometimes seem helpful, but most are far too brief to convey much content (the longest is only one minute). Many are “talking heads” of the authors giving a few-seconds-long clip on some topical issue (anxiety, guilt, etc.). Others are photo fly-throughs of various areas of Palestine, but with little or no commentary or explanation (though there is a music track!); they are left largely uninterpreted and essentially contentless. They entertain, but they do not educate.

To take but one section at random, the four chapters on Acts include nearly 30 full color photos (including 2 full-bleeds), about 40 sidebars, callouts, and other colored text boxes, 9 color maps, 25 graphic icons, and several other color illustrations. A number of the photos are either unidentified or are only remotely related to the text. Their only function seems to be the addition of visual impact. These features, in themselves, may not be objectionable (except, perhaps, for the unidentified or irrelevant photos), but the net impact produces a very postmodern look and feel that invites a hop scotch approach to the text. A bit of text here, hop to a photo there, on to a sidebar, then a map, and back for another piece of text. The layout, the use of color, the “eye candy” distract readers from the text. Rather than focusing on the truth and logic of the authors’ message, they are entertained. Perhaps this is intentional and an attempt to communicate with a postmodern audience. But especially since this is intended as a Christian college textbook, one wonders if we are not teaching or at least reinforcing a unbiblical world view in the very textbooks that we use.

⁷⁵Ellul’s observations are especially pertinent to this volume: “The textbook is progressively retreating everywhere.... Previously images were mere illustrations of a dominant text. Language was by far the most important element, and in addition there were images to make the text’s content more explicit, and to hold the reader’s attention. This was their sole purpose. Now the situation is reversed: the image contains everything. And as we turn the pages we follow a sequence of images, making use of a completely different mental operation. The text is there only to fill in the empty spaces and gaps, and also to explain, if necessary, what might not be clear in the images. It is true that sometimes the images are clear but do not clearly communicate what the reader is supposed to learn from them. Thus the relationship has been reversed: images once were illustrations of a text. Now the text has become the explanation of the images” (*Humiliation of the Word*, pp. 116–17).

Scripture Reading

As a second example, I find it ironic that many Christians who are opposed to postmodernity handle the text of Scripture in a very post-modern, cybernetic sort of way in public ministry. The public reading of Scripture is very important for the gathered church—it is commanded. But how is it often done? I am afraid that too often it is done in a very fragmented, extrapolated fashion, reminiscent of the deconstructed hypertext of some web structures.⁷⁶

As a case in point, I observe that often in contemporary worship settings the reading (usually responsive⁷⁷) comes from the hymnal (or the overhead) rather than from the Bible.⁷⁸ That in itself speaks loudly of our practical view of Scripture in that we can extrapolate it from its context and use it for whatever purpose we see fit. Or this example: the daily Scripture reading on a Christian radio station read Micah 6:8 and Luke 10:41–42. These disparate, unrelated texts were read back-to-back, without their references, and with no comment that would indicate to the reader that they were from different contexts. Apparently the intended (by the reader!) link is the phrase “what does the Lord require” in Micah and “one thing is needful” from Luke. Wrenching texts from their contexts and foisting artificial and illegitimate associations upon the gathered scraps has always been a problem, but this becomes an even greater problem in a postmodern context in which such associative jumps are considered normal, in which the reader creates the meaning. No longer do the author and the text determine meaning, but now the editor and reader deconstruct and rearrange verbal scraps to produce the desired effect or message, whether that was God’s intent or not.

Not only do such practices ignore the contextual elements and associations of the text, but the *way* in which they are often read tends to reinforce the isolated, discontinuous nature of their message. This has always been a problem with responsive reading. The constant alternation of readers depicts, not a coherent, integrated message, but one in which

⁷⁶This contrasts sharply with the practices of the early church; then “scripture was not read in snippets but in long segments” (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, p. 8; Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 1.67).

⁷⁷The same problem can occur with unison reading or with text read by the leader; the particular fashion in which the text is read is not my concern here (though a “responsive” format has always struck me as more suited to a Romanish or liturgical style than anything evangelical). My point here is the selection and use of the patchwork text.

⁷⁸I recognize that the multiplicity of Bible translations presents certain difficulties for group reading (whether unison or responsive). I am not convinced, however, that collecting verbal scraps in a topic-oriented pastiche in a hymnal is a legitimate solution to the problem.

we may dip in at any point.⁷⁹ More recent trends in “worship” exacerbate this even more as dramatic readings are used which break up the text for public reading into fragments even smaller than a verse.⁸⁰ Phrases and even individual words are parceled out to various voices, presumably in an attempt to create the desired dramatic “tone.” The result might be judged as artistically pleasing, but I fear that it is too often a hermeneutical cacophony that detracts from the *meaning* of the text. The model for such readings is the visual pastiche of television rather than the verbal, rational, theological model of the book. We must remember that it is, after all, The Book that we are reading.

We may think that we have gotten away with it since the message that we generate in this fashion *is* (usually) “orthodox” (at least at some surface level). But many people do not seem the least bit concerned about such matters. After all, the result is “good” because it produces “worship” (or so we assume—it is perhaps simply an emotion that may be rather remote from true worship).⁸¹ The modern church has become

⁷⁹The way in which many Bibles are printed often implies the very same problem. KJV (& NKJV) Bibles have traditionally been printed with each verse formatted as a separate paragraph. The NASB has chosen to follow the same questionable path (reverting from the ASV). But this typography teaches the reader that the text is composed of individual statements that can be addressed (and memorized) in isolation from their context. There is much to be said for the typography of the NIV which lays out the text on the page in paragraph and pericope units. The verse numbers have been minimized by printing them in smaller type. This still facilitates their use in reference, but correctly de-emphasizes them in reading and interpretation. The new NET Bible has followed a similar format (though bolding the verse reference doesn’t help), as have a number of other newer translations. These considerations illustrate well the point that “the medium is the message.” The technology, including the typography, *does* affect the message conveyed.

⁸⁰I would not argue that any form of multiple readers is invalid. If done carefully, using larger sections of text and based on textual phenomenon (dialogue, argument shifts, rhetorical devices, etc.), multiple readers may, indeed, facilitate comprehension of the argument of some texts. Even in these situations, however, I would argue that including unrehearsed, congregational or group readings/responses detracts from the text. To be effective, and to make the point that the text speaks with a single voice, it is best to employ single voices for such attempts. (The exception would be texts such as Deut 27 and Ps 136 that explicitly call for a group/unison response in their original setting. I would not want to extrapolate such antiphonal responses to other texts that did not, by their nature and message, suggest it.)

⁸¹Other than Scripture reading, I have not attempted to address issues related to worship in this article, at least in any direct fashion. There are a few suggestive comments in Shrader’s recent article that are worth considering (and reading in their original context). “To the postmodernist, worship is mere technological symbolism over substance. In his world the symbols *are* the substance.... Because he sees reality and truth as being constructed at the moment, worship need not go beyond the worship act. This amounts to worshipping worship. The more ‘real’ the worship seems, the less a postmodern person needs or wants anything beyond that.” And again, “we are evangelizing on thin ice when we turn our church services into technological playlands for the postmodern’s sake and then ask him to respond to a real, historical message” (“Postmodern

as pragmatic in this scenario as the classic Jesuits for whom the end justified the means.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What are we to make of all this? How should we communicate the text in the Information Age? We need to start with “the simple realization that what is newer may be neither truer nor better.... [This] should drive us to a deeper level of analysis with respect to our culture and our worldview.”⁸² It ought also suggest some guidelines in the use of the new technology. I would propose several.

1. Our ministry must be theocentric/Christocentric not anthropocentric. Since the only way that we have of knowing God is through the text of Scripture, the text must remain central in our ministry. Whenever and however we communicate the Word of God, we must assure that the text of Scripture is both the focal point and the dominant component of any ministry situation. To do otherwise is to move toward the realm of entertainment, emotionalism, and subjectivity and away from knowing him.⁸³

2. Technology is usable in many of its forms, but it should not be used blindly, assuming that we must use it as others do with no critical reflection on the impact of the medium on the message. Because it *can* be done does not mean that it *should* be done—even if (and perhaps *especially if*) the perceived impact is a stunning demonstration of technological prowess.

3. To be specific, and to combine the implications of 1 and 2, any media presentation that intends to accomplish more than entertainment should employ technology only to illustrate and elucidate the text. Text, as opposed to image and sound, must dominate.⁸⁴ If your audience remembers the sound track as opposed to the content of the text, you have

Era,” pp. 25, 26).

⁸²Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 156.

⁸³Remember that “this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

⁸⁴This does not mean that there should be nothing on the screen but text, and the more text the better. We must understand both the limitations and benefits of the particular technology and use it accordingly. For example, do not display an overhead or video screen filled with text smaller than 24 points. Doing so results in illegibility and actually *detracts* from the significance of the text. This is also true of other technologies; for example, printing a Bible in the San Francisco font—or even in an “elegant,” calligraphic font such as Zaph Chancery.

failed miserably in communicating the Word of God.⁸⁵ If your sound effects or your flashy graphics or animated sequences or polished photography or glitzy transitions dominate your presentation, then you have moved from ministering the Word to entertaining an audience. This is true whether we use technology to supplement education, proclamation, or worship—Bible lesson, sermon, or song.⁸⁶

4. In education as in public worship, textual content must have the primacy. Text should not be merely an accessory to an image or sound. Rather, image and sound must serve an illustrative role. “Thought based on images can be neither abstract nor critical.”⁸⁷ A picture may be worth a thousand words, but that only specifies the market value; it says little about the truth value of your communication.⁸⁸ We have too often generalized from specific situations in which a picture helps illustrate a concrete situation and illegitimately attempted to represent even abstract concepts with visual symbols. Just because our society has adopted an anti-word, anti-intellectual, anti-rational mentality does not mean that we must stoop to their level.

Teachers who work out illustrations and make use of films to make knowledge more accessible scarcely concern themselves with such effects. This is because they are convinced that the mode of thinking that involves images and intuition can fit perfectly with the traditional mode of thinking by reasoning and discourse. An unreasoned and unproved conviction exists that the two kinds of thinking complement each other. Yet it seems clear that the enormous difference between the two keeps them from being complementary. They are *opposing* mental attitudes, which presuppose essentially divergent capacities and training.⁸⁹

The ‘multimedia’ environment supposedly enhances learning by

⁸⁵Although outside the focus of this essay, it might be noted that this principle applies directly to music as well. If the dominant impact is the accompaniment (whether by volume, tempo, or beat) rather than the words, we have perverted God’s gift of music and exchanged the communication of truth for mere entertainment. There is certainly a place for purely instrumental music (and even for music intended only for entertainment), but we ought not deceive ourselves into thinking that such music is part of ministering the Word of God. It may be art, even good art (and if it is, it may glorify God and many even have a place in a church meeting), but let’s not confuse art with communicating God’s truth. Aesthetics and proclamation are distinct categories.

⁸⁶It is perhaps most difficult with music since we are already one step removed from the text of Scripture already—unless we are singing Scripture songs or psalms.

⁸⁷Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, p. 214.

⁸⁸As my friend and former colleague, Dr. John Lawlor, observed upon reading an early draft of this article, “God opted for the thousand words!”

⁸⁹Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, p. 214.

multiplying the types of sensory inputs. In the process, however, the nature of the text tends to change. Rather than standing alone as the center of whatever meaning is conveyed, the text is cropped, simplified, and assimilated into the graphical environment.⁹⁰

5. The web is not to be avoided just because it so easily lends itself to the methodology of postmodernity. We must, however, use it in a way that focuses on content and context rather than on isolated pages and tangential links.⁹¹ We must use it in such a way that linearity and logical development is not lost.⁹² We cannot control how others will use (or misuse) our pages, but if web pages are to be “Christian,” they should not only relate to Christian topics (or handle non-biblical topics in a Christian way), but should be logically organized, tastefully done, and content-oriented.⁹³ To “have a page” as a status symbol or to collect yet another list of links is not a Christian use of the web.

It is worth remembering that God has a book, not a website.⁹⁴

⁹⁰Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 66.

⁹¹“Cyberspace can...beguile us into mistaking connectivity for community, data for wisdom, and efficiency for excellence. If cyberspace is kept closely fastened to the real world, and if we refuse its temptations to exchange the virtual for the literal, it can be our servant. Otherwise it will become a demanding and all-consuming media master” (Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 143).

⁹²Links should not be inserted wherever a related page is available. Many contemporary web pages do just that by, e.g., always linking to a company’s page when their name is mentioned. This only invites unrelated browsing and detracts from the argument that you are making. If such cross references are helpful to the reader, I would suggest that they are better included in a separate section of the page, probably at the end. On the other hand, some use of hypertext links can be profitable. The use of separate glossary or footnote files that link from the main text to the note and then back to the main text can facilitate reader comprehension. This form of hypertext replicates similar reference materials from the book form: footnotes (hopefully not endnotes!), glossaries, appendices, indexes, etc.

⁹³One of the best examples of this that I have seen is the Biblical Studies Foundation site: <<http://www.bible.org>>. By contrast, one of the best (worst?) examples of a hypertext site that deliberately eschews linearity is The Electronic Labyrinth: <<http://web.uvic.ca/~ckee/elab.html>>. This is not a Christian site, but it illustrates well a number of the dangers addressed in this essay.

⁹⁴“The Internet exists for people to connect with each other. But to connect with the mystery of the universe, the Internet won’t do. God doesn’t have a Web site” (Jaron Lanier, cited in Groothuis, *Cyber-Space*, p. 120). If you should happen across the like of “God’s Web Page” at <<http://www.avana.net/~verrier/GOD.COM.HTM>>, rest assured that it is a “tongue-in-cheek” page!