Computer-Mediated Communication and Ecclesiological Challenges To and From the Reformed Tradition

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/1451

Boston University
BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Dissertation

COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION
AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL CHALLENGES TO AND FROM
THE REFORMED TRADITION

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2011
COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION
AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL CHALLENGES TO AND FROM
THE REFORMED TRADITION

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COMMUNICATION
AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL CHALLENGES TO AND FROM
THE REFORMED TRADITION

(Order No. )

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Doctor of Philosophy
Boston University School of Theology, 2011

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ABSTRACT

Communities of faith have appeared online since the inception of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and are now ubiquitous. Yet the character and legitimacy of Internet communities as ecclesial bodies is often disputed by traditional churches; and the Internet’s ability to host the church as church for online Christians remains a question. This dissertation carries out a practical theological conversation between three main sources: the phenomenon of the church online; ecclesiology (especially that characteristic of Reformed communities); and communication theory.

After establishing the need for this study in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 investigates the online presence of Christians and trends in their Internet use, including its history and current expressions. Chapter 3 sets out an historical overview of the Reformed Tradition, focusing on the work of John Calvin and Karl Barth, as well as more contemporary
theologians. With a theological context in which to consider online churches in place, Chapter 4 introduces four theological themes prominent in both ecclesiology and CMC studies: authority; community; mediation; and embodiment. These themes constitute the primary lens through which the dissertation conducts a critical-confessional interface between communication theory and ecclesiology in the examination of CMC. Chapter 5 continues the contextualization of online churches with consideration of communication theories that impact CMC, focusing on three major communication theories: Narrative Theory; Interpretive Theory; and Speech Act Theory.

Chapter 6 contains the critical conversation between ecclesiology and communication theory by correlating the aforementioned communication theories with Narrative Theology, Communities of Practice, and Theo-Drama, and applying these to the four theological themes noted above. In addition, new or anticipated developments in CMC investigated in relationship to traditional ecclesiologies and the prospect of cyber-ecclesiology. Chapter 7 offers an evaluative tool consisting of a three-step hermeneutical process that examines: 1) the history, tradition, and ecclesiology of the particular community being evaluated; 2) communication theories and the process of religious-social shaping of technology; and 3) CMC criteria for establishing the presence of a stable, interactive, and relational community. As this hermeneutical process unfolds, it holds the church at the center of the process, seeking a contextual yet faithful understanding of the church.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The presence of Christian faith communities online has been actively researched for many years. We find community online, and we find Christianity online, but the question remains whether we find the church online. While research already exists on particular websites and on spiritual themes online, my intention is to delineate the ecclesiological issues at stake in this conversation while highlighting the importance of this conversation for the health and wellbeing of the church. The fact that more and more people turn to computer-mediated communication (hereafter CMC) as a source for spiritual nurture and communal relationship may call into question the viability of

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2 Computer-Mediated Communication is fundamentally the study of the convergence of technology and the philosophy of human/machine interaction. It is a sub-category within communication studies which examines machines and their potential to alter human interaction without the need for physical human presence, focusing on the ways in which human behaviors are affected by the reception, production, and dissemination of information through machines.
traditional ecclesiastical institutions. Yet the character and legitimacy of Internet communities as ecclesial bodies is itself disputed. It is clear that Christianity exists in cyberspace in a variety of forms, but the ability of the Internet to host the church as church for online Christians remains a question. To this end I pose the following research questions: Is it possible for the church to be the church online? What are the ecclesiological implications of this phenomenon and what are the ecclesiological issues at stake? This project is an exercise in practical theology in as much as the response to these questions can assist ecclesial communities in the process of determining the future shape of the church.

My intent in this project is to suggest a variety of lenses through which to view contemporary developments around CMC and to assess the nature of the Internet church while remaining respectful, though critical, towards current ecclesiologies. Such an approach begins from within the church and is for the church. It is also a highly contextualized project in that each community will have its own theology, history, and practices to analyze and critique. I begin with a normative base in the Reformed theological tradition as manifested in contemporary US Protestantism,\(^3\) while placing that

\(^3\)Acknowledging the breadth and ambiguity of this term, my definition of Reformed theological tradition is based on a self-description offered by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Reformed churches include “Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed and United churches with roots in the 16th-century Reformation led by John Calvin, John Knox and others.” (World Alliance of Reformed Churches, “Homepage,” http://warc.jalb.de/warcjsp/side.jsp?news_id=2&part2_id=19&navi=8 (accessed January 31, 2009)). My focus will be upon the churches within modern US Protestantism that place themselves within this category and which would subscribe to the popular motto “Ecclesia reformata, quia simper reformanda” (the Reformed church because always reforming) as a way to express the conviction that the Word of God is not static. (see Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of*
tradition in dialogue with contemporary ecclesiologists and theologians. The questions which a virtual ecclesiology provokes, such as concerns about virtual space and sacred space, community, the role of ritual, the valuation of physical sense, and the traditional dichotomies of mind and body as well as the spiritual and the physical, can be approached from both a social scientific perspective and a theological perspective. They can also take place, as I intend to show, from within a conversation between the two. The science of communication theory will be invoked to describe and articulate the role of CMC in the current mediatized culture we inhabit while maintaining close contact with prior intersections of Christian faith experience and media developments. These questions, when asked independently from a faith commitment, lead to fascinating social science observations and issues. However, if they are asked from within the context of a Christian community seeking faithful response to emerging socio-cultural issues, they are opportunities for every Christian community to reflect critically upon Christian praxis in light of the Christian revelation as the normative center.

Significance of the Problem

The North American appropriation of new media technologies, including CMC, is no longer newsworthy due to its prevalence. The number of Internet users in the US is significant and growing. In December 2005, 44% of the adult population used the

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Internet on a “typical” day, up from 36% in January 2002. In the same time period, adults who said they logged onto the Internet daily increased from 27% to 35%.\(^4\)

According to the Pew Internet Forum, Internet use has plateaued since 2006, with 79% percent of the adult population online:

Seventy-nine percent of all American adults go online, a number that has remained relatively steady since early 2006. While most generations have internet adoption rates of at least 70%, internet use drops off significantly for adults over age 65: only 58% of adults ages 65-73 (the Silent Generation) and 30% of adults age 74 and older (the G.I. Generation) go online. As a result, younger generations continue to be over-represented in the online population, with adults ages 45 and younger constituting about 56% of the online population, despite making up only 49% of the total adult population.\(^5\)

While Internet use remains strongest among younger generations, the largest increase in usage is in the oldest generations with an increase from 26% of users aged 70-75 in 2005 to 45% in 2009.\(^6\)

If Internet use is confined to religious usage, the number of users remains significant. In a 2004 report, Pew found that 64% of all internet users have used the Internet for some type of religious purpose. This could include seeking information, 


sending email or other communications, or inquiring about spiritual matters. Those whom the Pew studies call “Religion Surfers” are also more actively religious than many of their non-user counterparts. Religion Surfers describe their faith as “very strong,” at the level of 81%, whereas only 61% of the general public made that claim. Internet use has also made the Religion Surfers more active offline: 74% say they attend religious services at least once a week while only 26%-39% of non-users attend weekly. Another example is found in prayer and meditation: while 23% of non-users say they pray or meditate daily, and 54% report that they pray often, 74% of Religion Surfers pray or meditate at least once a week. The number of sites available to all surfers continues to increase, as noted by the Pew Project. In 1999 a search of Yahoo’s Religion and Spirituality subsection produced 11,000 websites: by August 2002 there had been a 300% increase in sites. A search of the same category conducted on December 7, 2008 provided 160,000,000 hits. On the same day, a Google search provided an equally large number of hits: “spirituality:” 62,200,000 hits, “church:” 323,000,000, and “Christian


community:” 14,100,000 hits. Seeking information about religion and spirituality remains one of the key Internet activities in 2010 across all age groups.¹⁰

Though many surveys indicate that the quest is primarily for information rather than personal connection, not all searches are limited to information. The variety and number of interactive experiences reported, including email usage, social networking sites, virtual churches, and fantasy sites, continue to grow. In contrast, many non-Internet churches are not experiencing the same level of inquiry and activity. Mainline churches in particular are experiencing a decline in congregations and members. Consider these statistics from three mainline denominations related to the Reformed tradition, using dates that reflect pre-CMC statistics as well as after the introduction of CMC:

**Table 1. Denominational Statistics for Membership and Congregations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Churches</th>
<th>Membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church, USA</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>11,554</td>
<td>3,048,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>11,178</td>
<td>3,485,332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>11,019</td>
<td>3,189,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Church of Christ</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>6,408</td>
<td>1,683,777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>5,923</td>
<td>1,377,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>5,567</td>
<td>1,224,297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed Church in America</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>342,275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>289,392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>894</td>
<td>269,815</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is impossible to conclude from statistics such as these that there has been a migration of activity and vitality away from traditional denominational communities to online sites, and yet the decline of the one and the growth of the other during this same period is striking and worthy of more investigation, especially in terms of whether or not the established mainline churches can respond to this shift in a constructive way. As new social media technologies are continuously evolving, it is becoming easier and easier to find communities online that permit immediate and simultaneous modes of communication, including both visual and audio formats as opposed to communication forms that were at one time primarily text-based online. Along with the evolving technologies of social networking is the increasing age range of social technology users: “While the youngest generations are still significantly more likely to use social network sites, the fastest growth has come from internet users 74 and older: social network site usage for this oldest cohort has quadrupled since 2008, from 4% to 16%.”\(^{11}\) The expansion of Internet use and the use of social networking sites into all age ranges—including the older age groups that have been the staunch supporters of traditional physical communities—points toward the necessity of careful and faithful consideration of the church online.

One potentially constructive approach to this shift in vitality and increased Internet use would be to consider the presence, purpose, and possibility of online churches as a valid ecclesial presence. There is certainly already an online presence by

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
the established churches, as well as a variety of opportunities to participate in physically-based worship. LifeChurch.tv, for example, has multiple worship sites, including an online presence and a church in Second Life; all locations participate in the same worship experience: “Through satellite broadcasts that enable all of our twelve locations to be connected as one, LifeChurch.tv is a multi-site church that transcends metropolitan regions.”13 But the question remains unanswered and ambiguous as to whether participation in such sites constitutes ecclesial participation. Is the church online a valid expression of the church? For years the United Church of Christ online community “i.ucc” introduced itself as “an online community sponsored by the United Church of Christ.”14 It specifically did not refer to the site as a congregation or a church. Though the distinction is not emphasized, one finds here an implicit privileging of traditional ecclesiological standards and definitions that is representative of many mainline denominations.

At the heart of this situation lie ecclesiological issues. Can the church be the church online? Ecclesiological issues that make online ecclesiology problematic include

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12 Second Life is an online virtual world wherein users (called Residents) interact with one another through avatars. Residents can explore the world, meet other residents, socialize, join organizations, conduct business and trade, shop, and participate in group activities. For additional information, see the website at http://secondlife.com/ (accessed March 22, 2011).


the location of authority on the Internet, the traditional understanding of the body of Christ as a physically embodied community gathered in one physical location, and the ability to participate in a sacramental life. To date these questions have not been adequately addressed. The web presence of established churches has focused on providing information and outreach. Both are laudable and important, of course, but the established churches neglect the ecclesiological function of online communities at their peril. As new media technology and CMC methods evolve, there is an ongoing imperative for the church to evolve in its consideration of what constitutes ecclesial identity. Unfortunately, often individuals or congregations within mainline denominations do not have an articulated ecclesial identity and not all churches necessarily have a written article of faith on the church. Nor do many churches have a clear communication policy or theory. Ineke de Feijter, a professor of media, religion and culture at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam has studied and analyzed Christian communication policy in the European context. Within this context she studied policy statements issued by the Vatican, the Lutheran World Federation, the Church of England, and a variety of state churches. Though she acknowledges that she was selective in the documents she reviewed, it is clear that not all communions represented in Europe have produced a clear communication policy. This lack of clear, comprehensive statements is a problem: “A general underlying problem is the absence and inaccuracy in defining terms frequently used. Related problems include coherence in outlook, repetition, and the status, goal and addressees of statements. Repetition questions whether new media
cultural developments and their impact are judged on their merits, and whether they are contextually applied.\(^{15}\) While Feijter’s research focus is on European policy statements, I believe it is true for the North American situation as well.

This dissertation seeks to interface ecclesiological issues and CMC more deliberately than has previously been attempted. Just as churches have struggled to help seekers and new initiates move from an evangelical commitment to integrated participation and incorporation, so too the churches must now consider how to provide more than information to the volumes of Internet users seeking spiritual connection and community. Christianity has faced similar challenges over the centuries as media development has changed communication patterns: the move from an oral tradition to the written word was an early challenge, followed by the move from the aural Word to the written Word as the printing press made books available to a broad and uncontrolled readership, and the introduction of electronic media, including film, radio, and television. CMC is simply one of the most recent media to demand attention, and to diminish or neglect its importance is to ignore a vast segment of the population and its relationship to spiritual matters.

Sources

This project seeks to engender a conversation among three main sources of information: the phenomenon of the church in its relationship to CMC, ecclesiology, and communication theory. The first source includes a close analysis of Christian community as found online. Early research on the intersection of religion and CMC noted the different ways in which religion was found on the Internet. Christopher Helland characterized the difference as a distinction between an “online church” and a “church online.” Religion online is a source of information and/or services related to religious groups and traditions, and may include commercial sites. Online religion, however, is characterized by invitation, participation, and practice. Its content and purpose claims to be relational at heart. Whatever tradition the site purports to represent, the user is invited to engage in thought as well as some form of interaction and ritual observance. These two categories represent the ends of a spectrum of religious sites, with most sites including a combination of information and practice.\(^{16}\) I would also circumscribe the phenomena by applying Lorne Dawson’s definition of an authentic online community, which includes six criteria, all of which are also applicable to a physically constituted community: interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, “netizenship” and social control, personal concern, and occurrence in a public space (these are examined

more closely in Chapter Two). Because there are so many ways a community can be described and analyzed, I suggest these criteria as a place to begin the conversation rather than as a definitive description of community. Within these parameters, I define the character of a cyber-ecclesia as found online using contemporary and emerging technologies.

In order to analyze this phenomenon, I rely upon sources from two distinct academic disciplines. Ecclesiology seeks to explore and to understand what it means to be the church. Because there is no one single definition of church, I survey the spectrum of ecclesiologies at work in the non-Internet church today, with a particular emphasis upon Protestant ecclesiology within the Reformed tradition. John Calvin and Karl Barth are two of the most prominent historical voices within this tradition, but other voices are added, particularly those from the twentieth century. Four prominent theological themes found in all ecclesiological conversations frame the discussion: authority, community, mediation, and embodiment (found in Chapter Four).

These four themes characterize the intersection of CMC and ecclesiology in many ways. For example, within many Protestant traditions authority is a huge issue that is reflected in polity as well as theology, and is currently enlivened by the contributions of CMC in the form of blogs, hypertext, and the constant flow of information available via the Internet. The question of the very nature of what we mean by community and its relationship to place has become more urgent given the rapid development of CMC and

\[17\text{Dawson and Cowan, 83.}\]
social networking sites that foster relationships and meaning beyond physical boundaries. This question has received new and creative attention from ecclesiologists, philosophers, sociologists, place theorists, and social psychologists. The theme of mediation revolves around the issue of how we know and experience the presence of God and grace. For example, the question of how sacraments can be experienced online is in direct relationship to the Reformation debates on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Now, as then, the relationship of the physical and the spiritual is of vast importance to understanding the connections between CMC and ecclesiology. Finally, embodiment speaks to the question of the importance of human presence in relationship: can you be Christianly present to another when your connection is mediated by a machine? Does the Incarnation imply the necessity of bodily presence to remain a source of grace?

The third source for this study is communication studies. Communication studies are a vast body of literature and theory. According to The National Center for Education Statistics, communication studies include “Instructional programs that focus on how


messages in various media are produced, used, and interpreted within and across different contexts, channels, and cultures, and that prepare individuals to apply communication knowledge and skills professionally.\textsuperscript{20} I briefly outline the progression of communication studies from its early basis in information theory (linear models), through interactive models and finally to the current trend towards transactional theories.\textsuperscript{21}

Within this broad sweep of communication theory I focus on three categories of theory that overlap and interact: Narrative Theory, Interpretive Theory, and the branch of Semiotics known as Speech Act Theory.\textsuperscript{22} The study of CMC itself is a sub-category within Mass Communication Theory for several reasons, including its strong and pervasive role in contemporary cultures and its focus on the social interaction of individuals and groups.\textsuperscript{23} Because Mass Communication Theory focuses on the one-


\textsuperscript{23} The following definition captures the breadth of CMC: “Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems (or non-networked computers) that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages. Studies of CMC can view this process from a variety of interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives by focusing on some combination of people, technology, processes, or effects. Some of these perspectives include the social, cognitive/psychological, linguistic, cultural, technical, or political aspects;
directional dispersal of information to a massive audience, which is no longer a primary characteristic of CMC because of its interactive capabilities, I do not deal specifically with this theory. CMC as a discipline has developed beyond its original designation as an aspect of Mass Communication as it became clear that CMC was more than a discussion about new technology and communication: it is also about the convergence of, and interaction of, technology, philosophy, and human behaviors, all of which extend well beyond a basic understanding of Mass Communication theory.

I do, however, introduce a branch of communication studies that is not based on theory but rather on the interaction of social values and technology: social shaping of technology. This is a research area which “examines technological change and user innovation as a social process.” When combined with the application of communication theories that expose the power of speech, the place of narrative, and the role of the audience (or community) as the interpretive center of an experience or a

and/or draw on fields such as human communication, rhetoric and composition, media studies, human-computer interaction, journalism, telecommunications, computer science, technical communication, or information studies.” John December, http://www.december.com/john/study/cmc/what.html (accessed January 27, 2009).

24 Heidi Campbell, “Spiritualizing the Internet: Uncovering Discourse and Narrative of Religious Internet Usage”, Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religion on the Internet. 2005, 1(1); 2, http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5824 (accessed January 6, 2011). She goes on to say: “In order to understand how religious users shape and negotiate the Internet for their purposes, or what will be referred to as the religious shaping of technology, this process is best describe through its relationship to the SST approach. SST offers insight into how distinct communities or groups of technology users have been studied. It also sets the stage for considering how religious users shape technology towards their goals and desire. This provides insight into why Internet technology might be interpreted through a social religious shaping of technology paradigm.”
message, the social shaping of technology provides a hermeneutical process capable of offering tools for critical analysis of both physical and virtual communities.

Based on a typology of ways theology might relate to other theoretical or scientific disciplines produced by J. Poling and D. Miller, my work with communication theory follows a “critical-confessional” model of reflection and practice that emphasizes the normative quality of theology and tradition but seeks to employ other disciplines to critique, understand, and if necessary transform traditional belief and practice to remain faithful. Communication studies provide a basis for moving from a purely phenomenological or theological perspective to an integration of sources and resources for practical application.

**Method**

As a project in practical theology, my concern is to offer an ongoing process of clarification as to what it means to have a faithful ecclesial identity in cyberspace. Congregations and Christians who propose to assess whether the church can be the church on the Internet must, of course, determine what it means to be the church in the first place. Therefore, the reflection and inquiry into ecclesiology and cyberspace provides an opportunity for the ongoing discernment of the relationship between church and culture as well as an opportunity to enliven Christian faithfulness by recovering and discovering a Christian identity as it relates to the nature and purpose of the church.

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This inquiry into the nature of ecclesial communities is not a matter of finding a single source or tradition that can clarify the shape and meaning of the true church. Instead, it is the weaving together of history and tradition, context and culture, technology and theology, creativity and convention. At the heart of this endeavor is the attempt to bring together a range of theories and ideas that have rarely been expressed in service to CMC or cyber-ecclesiology but which may, with creative reflection and a willingness to forego (or at least a willingness to reassess) traditional assumptions, form a new image of human relationship amidst the community we call church. Therefore I make no claims that any theologians named herein would eagerly apply their theologies to an Internet church, but I do believe that they offer provocative and potential threads of discourse in the dialogue between the real and the virtual.

This project consists of five parts. The first part documents and describes the history and development of the Internet and its evolution into a platform for relationships and spirituality. Within that historical context I describe the phenomenon of the Christian presence online. It is essential to establish the existence and rapid growth of online Christianity for several reasons. First, if CMC is not seen as an active component of twenty-first century North American ecclesial existence, there is no purpose to questioning the existence of cyber-ecclesiology. Secondly, if the varieties of experience of “church” online are not acknowledged and described, there is no sense of the breadth and depth of the situation in relationship to established, recognized ecclesial bodies. Thirdly, a review of the phenomenon will serve to establish an agreed-upon context and
framework for further investigation through the lens of ecclesiology and communication theory, and for the development of practical applications of this information. Finally, I select one of the original five sites to evaluate first for its computer-mediated presentation of church (how they look, how user-friendly they are, what types of communication are possible), and secondly to be evaluate its fidelity to ecclesial forms and theological issues.

Once the phenomenon is fully described, the second objective of this project is to review and assess particular ecclesiological accounts and their implications for CMC. My focus is primarily (though not exclusively) on post-Reformation ecclesiology in the Reformed tradition. To this end the ecclesiological work of John Calvin and Karl Barth is lifted up as important examples of a Reformed ecclesiology, while also acknowledging other directions Reformed ecclesiology has taken. In this process I also note the theological implications of the Reformed manner of negotiating interpretive shifts in theology and practice. In particular, I focus on the role of Reformed Confessions as a vehicle for contextual interpretation and pluraformity. After noting the trajectory of Reformed ecclesiology and models of the church, I introduce four theological themes important to any consideration of cyber-ecclesiology. These four themes are authority, community, mediation, and embodiment. They are, for this project, the primary lenses through which I am able to conduct the critical-confessional interface between communication theory and ecclesiology when examining CMC.
The third part of this project reviews communication literature and theories most directly impacting CMC and the online church. Communication theories have long been moving away from the transmission models of communication that emphasize the message of the sender as the primary component in communication. Contemporary communication theories more frequently emphasize the audience rather than the sender, focusing on the reception of the message and the context of the receiver rather than the intentions of the sender. The meaning of the message also comes under scrutiny through the purview of semiotics and the role of symbols, signs, and images in our communication. In addition, the media through which a message is received is an important consideration and is not to be discounted as a passive, or neutral, part of communication. Each of these aspects of communication theory are potentially implicated in Christian identity formation and, therefore, ecclesial identity.

An additional aspect of communication studies is also reviewed as a part of the correlation process: the discipline of social shaping of technology. Heidi Campbell has developed a process she calls the religious-social shaping of technology which, she contends, helps to move away from either a deterministic model of communication or one that is uncritically appropriated. She has suggested four common ways technology is described within religious communities and four theological discourses that interpret how the technology can be used. These two sets of descriptors intersect in order to form a discourse that allows religious communities to negotiate their relationship with technology.

*Table 2. Social Shaping of Technology and its Religious Implications*
Juxtaposing technology use and theological narratives in this manner suggests the many ways in which communication studies can inform a practical theological approach to ecclesiology. Thus, a close look at this literature and these theories will provide necessary resources for evaluating the prospect of a faithful online church.

Having laid a foundation constructed of theological norms and communication theories, the fourth part of this dissertation begins the dialogue between the two disciplines in relationship to the phenomenon of the online church. It is at this juncture that communication theories will intersect theological themes and ecclesial instantiations to create a dialogue aimed at evaluating the many threads of thought and practice that have emerged. In addition to the use of Campbell’s process of religious-social shaping of technology, I correlate the three broad communication theories of Narrative Theory,  

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26 Quentin J. Schultze conducted a similar analysis focusing on the relationship of Christianity to mass media. He determined five ways in which religious communities interacted with mass media: conversion, discernment, communion, exile, and faith. These categories represent “the ways that people used meaningful verbal and nonverbal symbols to interpret their world, to build and share those interpretations with others, and sometimes to persuade outsiders to agree with tribal or mainstream beliefs. In this sense, rhetoric is essentially an intentional form of persuasive communication in which participants pay attention to their public discourse, including how that discourse relates to their own identities, to others’ identities, and to their private as well as other public interests.” Quentin J. Schultze, Christianty and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 9-10. See also David Paul Nord, The evangelical origins of mass media in America, 1815-1835 (Columbia, SC: Association for Education in Journalism, 1984).
Interpretive Theory, and Speech Act Theory as being particularly useful in analyzing and critiquing cyber-ecclesiology. These are mirrored by three theological strands of thought that maintain many of the same values and intentions: Narrative Theology, Interpretive Communities and communities of practice, and theo-drama. I seek to bring together a sense of their potential interaction and ability to support a sustained analysis of ecclesial communities.

This dialogue naturally leads to the fifth and final portion of this project, which is to move from the observation of the phenomenon and attendant theological themes to an evaluation of the points of dialogue among evolving ecclesiologies, the attendant implications for traditional ecclesiologies, and the ability to articulate (on an individual or congregational level) Christian identity and ecclesiology. This evaluation addresses both new and existing dimensions of ecclesiological models, Christian identity, and an analysis of the Internet churches previewed in the first chapter. The evaluative tool I employ is a three step hermeneutical process which intertwines the ideas noted in earlier chapters: the history, tradition, ecclesiology of the particular community being evaluated; communication theories and an attentiveness to the process of religious-social shaping of technology; and CMC criteria for establishing the presence of a stable, interactive and relational community. As this hermeneutical process unfolds it holds the church at the center of the process, seeking a contextual yet faithful understanding of the church.

In the final analysis this hermeneutical process is a suggestion for an intentional commitment to identity formation of both the individual and the community. It is an
opportunity to clarify theological and ecclesiological principles that sustain our communities of faith while looking both to the past and the future as a way to re-envision the church. It is not a definitive process, nor a one-time process, but rather a continuous process of discernment and renewal focused on the intersection of the Christian narrative and its encounter with computer-mediated communication.
CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION
AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

What hath God wrought?
Holy Bible, Numbers 23:23
First message transmitted by the telegraph, between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., using Morse Code, 1844

To speak of the cyber-church phenomena is like trying to hit a moving target. The cyber-church erupts and evolves on an ongoing basis, ever changing its appearance, content, purpose, and audience. The cyber-church reflects technological advances, and these advances affect sites all across the Internet. This rapid pace of change is not unlike the force of change that swept through the world with the implementation of the telegraph and the development of Morse Code in the mid-nineteenth century, technology that was cutting edge for less than fifty years before it was overcome by an even more advanced rapid-communication system: the telephone.

When Queen Victoria’s reign ended in 1901, the telegraph’s greatest days were behind it. There was a telephone in one in ten homes in the United States, and it was being swiftly adopted all over the country. In 1903, the English inventor Donald Murray combined the best features of the Wheatstone and Baudot automatic telegraph systems into a single machine, which, with the addition of a typewriter keyboard, soon evolved into the teleprinter. Like the telephone, it could be operated by anyone. The heyday of the telegrapher as a highly paid, highly skilled information worker was over; telegraphers’ brief tenure as members of an elite community with mastery over a miraculous, cutting-edge technology had come to an end.¹

Due to this fluid existence, I first describe very briefly the history of the Internet and its emergence into public life, followed by an equally brief review of the computer technologies that have existed during the past few decades. The next step is to review the presence of the Internet in the US by way of describing the magnitude of its presence in both the public and private spheres. Finally, I describe the phenomena of the church on the Internet by using categories previously developed by Helland, Dawson, and the Pew Internet Project report *Cyberfaith* by way of limiting my field of search to a particular type of site.

**History of the Internet**

Until 1991 this type of research could not have been effectively conducted, nor was it even a topic of interest. In 1991 several events converged to make the Internet available to the public as well as making it a more usable network by the general public, thus opening the computer network to the creation of religious websites. In 1990 the government funding for ARPANET, the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network of the United States Department of Defense, was withdrawn and handed over to a variety of other networks. Some of these were still funded by the US government, such as NSFNET (National Science Foundation Network) but others networks were developing that had primarily commercial interests. ARPANET had served as a centralized force in the evolving computer network, and when that position was relinquished with the conclusion of government funding, de-centralization occurred rapidly as new network systems proliferated in the public domain.
Because NSFNET was still a government network, though no longer used for defense and strategic purposes, there was a decision to establish a protocol for appropriate use of the network. The Acceptable Use Policy implemented in 1991 stated: NSFNET Backbone services are provided to support open research and education in and among US research and instructional institutions, plus research arms of for-profit firms when engaged in open scholarly communication and research. Use for other purposes is not acceptable. At this point the public was given increased access to research and development, but not for “commercial” purposes. Commercial purposes would have included shared interest sites that were not applicable to research or academic concerns, social sites, personal communication, and any form of gaming. Thus the impetus for the development of commercial networks increased. Meanwhile, Congress passed the High-Performance Computing Act of 1991, sponsored by Senator Al Gore. Such government sanction of computer networking was a huge boost to the industry and to computer entrepreneurs. The third development of 1991 was the public release of World Wide Web (WWW) technology on August 6th. The WWW is not the same as a network. It is a network-based hypertext application that can be run on different operating systems, and it served as a way to standardize and organize the Internet. Originally developed in 1989, the first website was designed at CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research).

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Tim Berners-Lee led the development of WWW technology at CERN, which in turn became a major force in standardizing web browsing by incorporating hyperlinks within a site.

But the actual story of computer networks and computer mediated communication extends much farther back into the twentieth century and can be read through a variety of lenses—each offering a different emphasis on the history. It can be read as a security strategy growing out of Cold War concerns, a miracle of governmental patronage at work for technological advancement and the well being and education of society, as a history of technological development and application, as a strong entrepreneurial enterprise, as an example of human technology and philosophy converging in postmodern conundrums and the commodification of life, or as a history of social life and its push into new communicative dimensions.³ Campbell notes “it was social use of work-related tools such as email and newsgroups ‘that directly caused the increase in Internet use; these were applications that began to drive the Internet’.”⁴ Following her use of the historian

³ There are a range of studies dedicated to internet history. These include Heidi Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005); Manuel Castells, The Internet Galaxy: Reflections On The Internet, Business, And Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Kevin Hillstrom, The Internet Revolution. (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 2005); Howard Rhinegold, The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier,(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Paul Salus, Casting the Net: From ARPANET to Internet and Beyond (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, Publishing, 1995).

⁴ Heidi Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005), 4.
Paul Salus, I will focus on the history of the Internet as a social phenomena rather than its function as a technological or military development.

That being said, it is impossible to separate the Internet from its military origins. In response to the launch of Sputnik by the USSR in 1957, the Department of Defense formed the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). Though the development of the Internet was not an explicit agenda of ARPA, the goal of ARPA was to push the US into the lead in scientific and technological arenas as well as to provide increased security from Cold War protagonists. The evolution of the Internet was directly connected to this endeavor, for example, through the aspiration to develop technology that would survive national disaster and would remain workable despite the possible destruction of more traditional communication systems.\(^5\) One path of study went beyond the survival scenario and dealt with the ability of computers to communicate with one another. The concept of networked computers was to become a reality. On December 5, 1969 the first network was in place with four nodes: UCLA, Stanford Research Institute, University of Utah, and UC Santa Barbara. With this network, ARPANET was born. ARPANET was to become the backbone of the Internet as it provided a base to be built upon and to be reacted to. Research expanded rapidly in the field of networking, with the dual issues of technological capabilities and standardized protocols stoking the fires of research.

As research moved forward, one of the early and most significant developments was the development of an email protocol in March, 1972. Ray Tomlinson of Bolt

\(^5\) Ibid., 2.
Beranek & Newman, Inc. introduced the “@” into email, standardizing a fragmented but already popular application. In July 1972 the first email management program was developed. In 1975 the first ARPANET mailing list was created by Steve Walker. The implications of this list are important here: the most popular list was not one devoted to technological development but rather a list of science fiction lovers! From the beginning, email capabilities and technological development—communicating on a personal, social level—was a priority, albeit an unofficial priority. These groups continued to develop and expand, and they included a wide range of topics and interests, including religion. The first group dedicated to a particular religious group was “net.religion.jewish” in 1984, and in 1985 WELL was organized. WELL is the acronym for “Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link,” one of the first virtual communities. Howard Rhinegold, a proponent of electronic communities, describes his experience of WELL in very positive terms:

The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel passionately about e-mail and computer conferences. I’ve become one of them. I care about these people I met through my computer, and I care deeply about the future of the medium that enables us to assemble. I’m not alone in this emotional attachment to an apparently bloodless technological ritual. Millions of people on every continent also participate in the computer-mediated social groups known as virtual communities, and this population is growing fast. Finding the WELL was like discovering a cozy little world that had been flourishing without me, hidden

\[6\] Ibid., 4.
within the walls of my house; an entire cast of characters welcomed me to the troupe with great merriment as soon as I found the secret door.  

As research continued the audience for computer networking continued to grow. In 1979 email capabilities became publically/commercially available to personal computer users. In 1980 synchronous, or real-time, chat and the bulletin board system of asynchronous communication became available through commercial providers using the ARPANET system. Real-time chat is short-hand description of a variety of applications that allow “live” conversation, whereas bulletin-board systems are a method of communicating using posts (just as you would post a message on a cork bulletin board) that can be read at the users leisure. Because ARPANET was governmentally supported and originally intended for noncommercial uses, the increased commercial use was problematic in terms of both proclaimed purpose (research and military) and space (band width). Over the course of years other networks were developed and government research and activity was removed from ARPANET. While this maintained security and promoted a range of research endeavors, it also moved towards a decentralization of computer networking. The final moment of decentralization came in 1990 when ARPANET was dis-established and the first commercial provider of dial-up service is created. It wasn’t until 1995 when the final commercial restrictions were severed with the conclusion of NSF (National Science Foundation) sponsorship that commercial use exploded. The severing of public networks from government sponsored services

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rendered the Acceptable Use Policy of 1991 obsolete, and a variety of internet companies began to flourish.

What made the evolving computer networks so exciting in 1995 was not just the economic factors of commercial and financial gain, although those factors were substantial. The excitement was fueled by the evolution of hardware development and software applications that were endlessly modifying and increasing the capabilities of personal computing and network connections. Some highlights of the application revolution include:

- 1965 email: available as a mode of communication for multiple users of a mainframe computer system (and eventually leading to the creation of newsgroups and discussion lists) and publically available since 1972 in the form we now use
- 1973: network voice protocols developed, allowing for computer mediated conference calls
- 1979: MUDS (Multi-user Dungeons), or text-based virtual worlds; some consider them to be the precursors of current gaming applications, known as graphic MUDS
- 1991: WWW developed at CERN and made public in 1991, creating a relatively user-friendly way to create and browse sites (based, in part, on work done by Vennevar Bush in the 1940’s)
- 1992 brought the first audio and video multicasts into being
- 1993: Internet talk radio becomes commercially viable, and in 1994 first radio “cyberstation” broadcasts; asynchronous radio broadcasts become popular
- 1995: audio streaming technology takes off and real-time (synchronous) broadcasting begins; Internet-only radio begins
- 1999: the term “Web 2.0” is coined and is used to describe the new generation of applications that are collaborative and interactive and allow information sharing in a user-friendly format; will evolve into social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook among many, many other forms and formats
- 2002: blogs and wikis are emerging, based on early collaborative technologies dating back to Vennevar Bush’s work of the 1940’s and applications used to create e-mail style listservs
After the decentralization of the Internet in the early 1990’s, the story of the Internet and cyber-church shifts from being one of hardware technology and connectivity to one of primarily formatting and software applications. Personal computers became normative. The prevalence of personal computers and their affordability is in part due to the viability of network connections and the ability to focus attention on more elaborate applications for the existent hardware. It also reflects the increasing commercialism and marketplace competition of hardware systems, software applications, and systems of connection (dial-up, DSL, Broadband). Once the public was able to “connect” in new ways through computers, the desire for increased capabilities surged. This desire also reflects the increasing interest in being able to connect in a social way and not just in an academic or commercial way. Thus the rapid development of Web 2.0 technologies ensues, creating new ways to communicate interactively and collaboratively. This new technology, as mentioned above, reflects a move beyond information retrieval to relationship building.

The names of the applications which have enabled social networking and interactive relationships include the familiar names of messaging, wikis, blogs, social networking, and tweeting. In addition to the ability to communicate in real-time and interactively, these applications offer other changes to previous modes of CMC. With the increased sophistication of graphics, there was a shift from text based interactions to graphical interactions. For example, the use of avatars has developed as a way to identify oneself rather than a verbal username. This is quite clear when one compares early
MUDS and MOOS (an object-oriented MUD, which is a text-based online virtual world with multiple users) and their text based interactions to the current realm of video games or online worlds such as Second Life or Maple Story. With the introduction of graphic interface came a shift from a linear approach to communication and a more interactive approach, which resembles stream of consciousness interactions, or conversational exchanges. Which is exactly what was happening: CMC was no longer uni-directional but rather multi-directional and interactive. Real-time interactions, written, spoken, and visual, are now available, and they are available in many forms, from the traditional computer station, on TV screens, laptops, and phones. By 2008, more than 72% of adult Americans were connected to the Internet, a network that had only become publically accessible less than two decades earlier.

**Internet Use**

There is no contesting the rapid growth and popularity of the Internet. As the following compilation of data shows, growth was exponential:
Table 3. Expansion of the Internet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Hosts*</th>
<th>Networks**</th>
<th>WWW sites***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 1969</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1979</td>
<td>188</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1984</td>
<td>1,024</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1989</td>
<td>159,000</td>
<td>837</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December, 1990</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December, 1993</td>
<td></td>
<td>623</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October, 1994</td>
<td>3,864,000</td>
<td>37,022</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December, 1996</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>603,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July, 1999</td>
<td>56,218,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December, 1999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9,560,866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December, 2002</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>35,543,105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July, 2004</td>
<td>285,139,107</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December, 2005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>74,353,258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July, 2006</td>
<td>439,286,364</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* stations, or nodes, on a network
** the connection between physically separate networks
*** the WWW application was developed by Tim B-L and publically released in 1990

The growth of Internet use in the public domain is similarly rapid. It is estimated that by 2009 over 74% of the US adult population was connected.

Table 4. US Internet Use Statistics through June, 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Users</th>
<th>Percentage of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>124,000,000</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>167,196,688</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td></td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>201,661,159</td>
<td>68.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td></td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td></td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>220,141,969</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>239,893,600</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though developed by the government for governmental and academic purposes, the urge to interject personal interests and emotions into CMC was irresistible. As Campbell noted, by 1973 three quarters of ARPANET use was for email.\(^8\) Emoticons were first suggested for use in 1979, and “unofficial” social/interest groups began forming in the 1970’s as well:

**Table 5. USENET Growth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Number of Sites</th>
<th>Posts per day</th>
<th>Number of Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>7,800</td>
<td>1,933</td>
<td>381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>4,500</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>330,000</td>
<td>131,614</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Howard Rheingold notes that the government is to be credited with allowing its network to be used for non-official use, including the development and expansion of virtual communities that had nothing to do with government work: “It is to the credit of the top ARPA managers that they allowed virtual communities to happen, despite pressure to reign in the netheads when they seemed to be having too much fun.”\(^9\)

Over time, the use of the Internet has shifted in the public domain, reflecting who uses the technology. Pew discovered that of the 74% of the population on line, the

\(^8\) Campbell, 3.

\(^9\) Rhinegold, 70.
largest group is teens (93%), followed by Generation Y (87%), Generation X (82%),
Younger Boomers, ages 45-54 (79%), Older Boomers, ages 55-63 (70%), Silent
Generation (56%), and the GI Generation (31%). In some age groups the “penetration” of
the Internet into daily life is ubiquitous, and in other groups Internet use continues to
expand. The largest increase in internet use since 2005 was in the oldest age group, the
Silent Generation, ages 70-75.\(^\text{10}\) Taken as a whole, the activity of all US Internet users
breaks down as follows:

**Table 6. Internet Activities of US adults**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>All Online Adults (%)</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>All Online Adults (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use email</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>Visit government sites</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use search engines</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Bank online</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research products</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Watch videos online</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get health info</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Research for a job</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy something online</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Use social networking</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make travel plans</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Get religious info</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The number of adults using the Internet, whether at home or at work, whether for
personal or professional purposes, has steadily increased since statistics have been
collected. In December 2005, 44% of the adult population used the Internet on a “typical”
day, up from 36% in January 2002. In the same time period, adults who said they logged

onto the Internet daily increased from 27% to 35%. By May 2010, the number of adults logging in daily had increased to 79%.

Table 7. Internet Activities, 2008 for Adults, age 18 and Older

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Activity</th>
<th>% who does generally</th>
<th>% who does daily</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use the Internet</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send/Read Email</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for information</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek support for problems</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek religious/spiritual info.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post comments</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Download podcasts</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View live or recorded broadcast</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Interestingly, when questions are posed about using the Internet for religious and spiritual uses, the proclaimed use of the Internet for religious purposes remains significant. In a 2004 report, Pew found that 64% of all internet users have used the Internet for some type of religious purpose. This could include seeking information, sending email or other communications, or inquiring about spiritual matters. By 2009

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13 Stewart M. Hoover, Lynn Schofield Clark, Lee Rainie, Faith Online. Pew Internet & American Life Project (April 7, 2004),
(in the above chart), religious use had diminished to 35%. Use for religious and spiritual purposes was spread relatively evenly over all age groups: teens (26%), followed by Generation Y (31%), Generation X (38%), Younger Boomers (42%), Older Boomers (30%), Silent Generation (30%), and the GI Generation (35%).

In an early study by Pew, *CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online* (2001) the statistics indicate four types of “Religion Surfers” who, in turn, do their surfing for different purposes. The four categories are:

- **Active Seekers** (27%), those who spend the most time tracking down religious or spiritual content;
- **Converts** (36%), those who have adopted a different faith than that in which they were raised;
- **Community Members** (84%), those who belong to a congregation or worship group;
- **Outsiders** (12%), those who are acutely aware of belonging to a religious minority, and who may have felt discrimination based on their beliefs.\(^1^4\)

The activities of these religion surfers as a whole include the following activities:

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Table 8. Activities of online Religion Surfers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looked for information about their own faith</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Downloaded sermons</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looked for information about another faith</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Downloaded religious music</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emailed a prayer request</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Bought religious items online</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given spiritual guidance via email</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Planned religious activities via email</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gotten idea for religious ceremonies online</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Subscribed to a religious listserv</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sought spiritual guidance via email</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Used a faith-oriented matchmaking service</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The “Religion Surfers” of this study are also more actively religious than many of their non-user counterparts. Religion Surfers describe their faith as “very strong,” at the level of 81%, whereas only 61% of the general public made that claim. Internet use has also made the Religion Surfers more active offline: 74% say they attend religious services at least once a week while only 26%-39% of non-users attend weekly. Another example is found in prayer and meditation: while 23% of non-users say they pray or meditate daily, and 54% report that they pray often, 74% of Religion Surfers pray or meditate at least once a week.15

The number of sites available to all surfers continues to increase, as noted by the Pew Project. In 1999 a search of Yahoo’s Religion and Spirituality subsection produced

15 Larsen, 3-4.
11,000 websites: by August 2002 there had been a 300% increase in sites.\textsuperscript{16} A search of
the same category conducted on December 7, 2008 provided 160,000,000 hits. On the
same day, a Google search provided an equally large number of hits: “spirituality:”
62,200,000 hits, “church:” 323,000,000, and “Christian community:” 14,100,000 hits.

Not all of the statistics noted above indicate a large increase in internet use for
religious and spiritual purposes. The reasons for this are many. The variance in statistics
and the irregularity of increases reflects on some level the availability and cost of new
hardware and software applications. For example, email use was strong even at an early
date but begins to increase significantly only when personal computers become more
available and more affordable. As familiarity with CMC increases, the volume of use
also increases. Though email remains the single strongest application (dubbed “The
Killer App” in some circles for its tenacity and appeal to a range of ages: “60% of
internet users who use email, arguably the Internet’s all-time killer app, on a typical
day.”\textsuperscript{17}), it is not growing as fast as it once did. With the development of new
applications that are more interactive, email has diminished in its appeal. Looking at the
annual growth of email and its percentage change of use in the years when new
applications were released reflects the impact of new ways to communicate that are not

\textsuperscript{16} John B. Horrigan, “Online Communities: Networks that nurture long-distance relationships and

\textsuperscript{17} Deborah Fallows, “Search Engine Use.” Pew Internet & American Life Project (August 6,
December 15, 2008).
primarily text based. Audio, visual, synchronous, and interactive applications—especially when these features are combined in a single program—such as wikis, blogs, Skype, IM, video conferencing, and social networking sites have taken away some of the email audience, particularly among the youngest age groups. Consider the difference in use patterns between the youngest age group, teens (12-17) and the overall online adult population:

Table 9. Generational Differences in Online Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Teens (%)</th>
<th>All Adults (%)</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Teens (%)</th>
<th>All adults (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play games online</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Visit government sites</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch videos online</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Get religious info</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get info about a job</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Use email</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send instant messages</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Use search engines</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use social networking sites</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Research products</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Download music</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Get news</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create an SNS profile</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Make travel plans</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read Blogs</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Research for job</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a blog</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Rate a person/product</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit a virtual world</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Download videos</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get health info</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Online auctions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy something online</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Download podcasts</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is predicted that the development of ever smaller mobile computing devices and applications will continue to cut into the reign of text-based email communication as the strongest category of CMC usage. Twitter is one example of this application, which is a form of microblogging—a minimized form of blogging that limits the amount of information to be shared in one post. Following a study on the demographics of a “Twitter User,” PEW researchers predict:
In conclusion, Twitter users engage with news and own technology at the same rates as other internet users, but the ways in which they use the technology – to communicate, gather and share information – reveals their affinity for mobile, untethered and social opportunities for interaction. Moreover, Twitter as an application allows for and enhances these opportunities, so it is not so surprising that users would engage in these kinds of activities and also be drawn to an online application that expands those opportunities.\(^\text{18}\)

Other factors that are a part of the statistical impact of CMC include availability and economics. For example, Internet usage increases with the availability of broadband technology. Currently 63\% of adult Americans now have broadband internet connections at home, up from 55\% in May, 2008 and 42\% in March, 2006.\(^\text{19}\) Of course, there is a higher cost associated with broadband, which limits its use in less affluent segments of society—particularly among urban youth and young adults. It is also not as prevalent in rural areas as in urban areas.\(^\text{20}\) This may account for part of the shift to mobile communications and applications, such as Twitter, and away from CMC.

Yet another factor in determining the use of the Internet for spiritual and religious purposes is the type of questions asked of users when conducting surveys. How and what is asked can substantially change the response. For example, asking “Do you use the


\(^{20}\) The same PEW study, “Home Broadband Adoption 2009,” notes a number of the limitations accompanying the adoption of broadband.
Internet for religious and spiritual purposes?” is quite different than asking “Do you use email for religious and spiritual purposes?” or “Do you email members of your social network for religious and spiritual purposes, including such things as planning, helping, and seeking information?”

The more specific the question, the higher the response by participants in a survey. The following two questions serve as an example. The Pew study asked about “seeking religious or spiritual information,” versus the general survey question of “use for religious purposes.” In a Pew Internet & American Life Project Poll, Feb, 2007 for example, the question was asked: “Do you ever use the Internet to...look for religious or spiritual information online? (If Yes, ask:) Did you happen to do this yesterday, or not?”

The response was that 29% have done this, but not yesterday; 6% did it yesterday, and 65% have not done this.21 In contrast, The General Social Survey question 772 asked: in past 30 days have you used web sites for religious purposes? 79% responded never, 11.7% said 1-2 times, 4.5% said 3-5 times, and another 4.5% said more than 5 times.22

PEW received a response indicating 35%, and the General Survey received a response of 21%. The large difference in response patterns could represent a number of things, including confusion about what the question really referred to and to a lack of


connection between the action taken and a religious/spiritual endeavor. For example, if an Internet user is looking for a way to respond to a natural disaster by seeking information or ways to help, is that a religious endeavor, an act of generic human kindness, or a civic obligation? Likewise, is offering a person advice during a personal crisis a spiritual act, a friendly intervention, or an opportunity to share information? There may well be a tendency to discount some online behaviors as religious or spiritual, just as there is sometimes an unwillingness to be labeled as religious. Or, it may reflect a disconnection and a lack of awareness of traditional religious values (particularly those of the Judeo-Christian tradition) and behaviors, as well as a confused definition of a “good citizen” or a responsive neighbor.

Finally, another factor in trying to determine religious and spiritual use of the Internet is the rapidly changing face of CMC. In 2001, when PEW’s *CyberFaith* was published, or in 2000 when PEW’s *Wired churches, wired temples: Taking congregations and missions into cyberspace* was released, the applications that we find common today were just emerging or still unavailable. At the time they were written, information access was the main capability of CMC, with email an important function; the social networking capabilities of web 2.0 were only on the distant horizon. *Wired churches, wired temples* reported the following in 2000:

- 83% use of the Internet has helped congregational life – 25% say it has helped a great deal.
- 81% use of email by ministers, staffs, and congregation members has helped the spiritual life of the congregation to some extent – 35% say it has helped a great deal.
91% say email has helped congregation members and members of the staff stay more in touch with each other – 51% say it has helped a great deal.

63% say email has helped the congregation connect at least a bit more to the surrounding community – 17% say it has helped a lot.

The most commonly used features on these Web sites were:

- 83% encourage visitors to attend.
- 77% post mission statements, sermons, or other text concerning their faith.
- 76% have links to denomination and faith-related sites.
- 60% have links to scripture studies or devotional material.
- 56% post schedules, meeting minutes, and other internal communications.\(^{23}\)

One must wonder what the response would be today if the same questions were asked. None of the responses included the use of interactive applications or real-time applications. Interactive CMC has made podcasts and video interaction commonplace, and real-time experiences can also now be participatory as well as informative. Thus broadcasting a church service is no longer exceptional and can even include real-time engagement by users in terms of singing, prayer, and other participatory, responsive liturgical acts.

Whatever view of the data one holds, it is clear that Internet use has a penetration rate exceeding 75% of the entire adult population of the US, with some age groups being more connected than others. The production of new websites continues to grow. Social networking applications change and emerge rapidly, which affects how the Internet is used and for what purposes it is used. With each new development, what was once only

a fantastical dream comes closer to being a possibility, and sometimes even a reality. In 1945 the scientist Vannevar Bush wrote an article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, “As We May Think.” In this article he described a hypothetical creation, the Memex: “Consider a future device for individual use, which is a sort of mechanized private file and library. It needs a name, and to coin one at random, “memex” will do. A memex is a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory.”

He goes on to say: “All this is conventional, except for the projection forward of present-day mechanisms and gadgetry. It affords an immediate step, however, to associative indexing, the basic idea of which is a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another. This is the essential feature of the memex. The process of tying two items together is the important thing.” (Section 7) and “Wholly new forms of encyclopedias will appear, ready-made with a mesh of associative trails running through them, ready to be dropped into the memex and there amplified.” (Section 8) This thinking was almost fantastical at the time, but it was to become the foundation for what we now know as hypertext and the WWW, wikis, and blogging.

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Yet it wasn’t until the development of the WWW application in 1990 by Berners-Lee that this vision of technology, information, and connectivity became a viable, commercial reality. Thus, what we today consider awkward, confusing, laborious, or impractical may one day be normative. With that in mind, the phenomena of CMC in relationship to religious and spiritual purposes can only be reviewed situationally and contextually. Any attempt to make sweeping generalizations or dismissive gestures is a dangerous decision because the technology and creative vision that fuels CMC is ever changing: what is normative today will not be normative for long. So to rely solely on statistics as a basis for seeking ecclesial redefinitions is inadequate. A second approach must be applied simultaneously which reviews the content, expressed purpose, and technological capabilities of a particular site. To this I now turn.

The Phenomenon

Christian online communities have been in existence since the early technologies of bulletin board systems (BBS) in the early 1980’s, and can perhaps be dated even further back to the advent of email in the early 1970’s. The desire to establish a social space in which to communicate religious and spiritual values as well as a place to share information and concerns is as old as the technology which enabled its occurrence. And just as religious and spiritual organizations and expressions have proliferated over the centuries, so too have they increased in cyberspace. The variety of websites related to religion and spiritual needs is very broad, as demonstrated earlier. Because of the multitude of sites and a wide range of styles, content, and purpose, a number of models
for analysis of these sites have been posited. The intent of the models has not been to judge the sites, but rather to determine their status as a cyber-community versus being collections of information used by assorted and unrelated individuals. The criteria of “cyber” refers here to its primary home as the Internet rather than the physical world of an established “street” congregation or community. “Community” is related to the interaction and participation required to establish relationships rather than simply being a place to gather information. I would suggest the conflation of three models of analysis as a way to sort through the variety of sites available for exploration: Helland’s “online religion” versus “religion online,” Dawson’s six characteristic of an online community, and the religious categories identified in Cyberfaith, a Pew Internet Project.

In 2000 Christopher Helland described a way to distinguish among the rapidly multiplying religious sites. Applicable to any religious tradition, Helland suggested two categories of sites: “Religion Online,” which was essentially an information site, and “Online Religion,” which was characterized by interaction and participation. Both of these categories could be commercial, confessional, or a combination of both. Religion Online was often the home of sites representing traditional faith communities and established physical congregations. Thus a site sponsored by a denomination, a religious publishing house, or a faith community would be found in this category. The purpose of

these sites was to share information with the user and on occasion include interactive features. Online Religion sites, on the other hand, usually contained some information and resources, but the focus was more on engaging the user in thought, prayer, ritual observances, or some form of community activity. Thus prayer requests, chat rooms, bulletin boards, and listservs characterize this category. These two categories represent the ends of a spectrum of religious/spiritual sites, with most sites exhibiting a mixture of traits.

Helland suggested this categorization not long after the development of WWW applications in the mid-1990’s and fairly early during the period of rapid proliferation of religious websites. As technology and time has advanced, most popular sites have moved much closer to the Online Religion end of the spectrum, as interactive technologies and applications have gained sophistication and familiarity. At the same time it must be said that even the most information-based websites now include interactive components. Technological advances have served to conflate the dichotomy Helland established, because popular and heavily trafficked sites depend on maintaining cutting-edge technology that engages and compels users (consumers!) to remain interested in the site. Thus, in many ways the original helpful distinction has ceased to function, though it does continue to lift up two very crucial aspects of potential ecclesial sites: information and participation.²⁶

²⁶ Helland himself agrees with this assessment. See his later article, “Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet.” Online –
With the blurring of boundaries between Religion Online and Online Religion, the determination of a site as a “community” has gained importance. Given that any computer mediated community will not involve face to face interaction by definition of being mediated by a machine, what is it that makes it a community and not a collection of verbal messages that happen to be directed at a particular idea or situation? How can a community exist without “real” people? For the most part these questions will be addressed later in this paper, but for the purposes of describing religious and spiritual websites Lorne Dawson’s six point criteria for an online community is useful: “I would propose that a set of communications by computer warrants being considered evidence of the existence of a virtual community to degree that it displays six elements: (1) interactivity; (2) stability of membership; (3) stability of identity; (4) netizenship and social control; (5) personal concern; (6) occurrence in a public space.\(^\text{27}\) Dawson, of course, was not writing specifically about religious communities online. Nonetheless, I believe each of the six criterion he developed are implicit in viable and healthy physical communities as well, though not necessarily measured in the same way. Therefore, while not traditional ecclesiological categories for establishing the nature of an ecclesial community, they may be a helpful analytical tool for both online and physical communities.

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The first criterion of interactivity reflects the implicitly social characteristic of CMC: the Internet is a web of interconnected users. Interactivity as a category, however, has a range of nuances. The first is the question of method of interaction: is it reciprocal, is it a/synchronous, and is it available in a variety of formats (visual, aural, voice). Are these formats user friendly and easily accessible, and do they require additional computer components (making it more expensive and more exclusive) or special training? A second consideration of interactivity is the quality and purpose of the interaction. Depending upon the application being used, the content and purpose may range from factual to fantastical, from intellectual to personal, from peaceful to angry. Not all these forms are suitable in all communicative situations and the appropriateness of the interaction is important in establishing this criteria.

Stability of membership and stability of identity are the second and third criteria and reflect the need for both consistent and honest participation in the community. If participants are not frequent visitors, or are extremely erratic in their time and style of participation, they are not behaving within conventionally accepted communicative ways. Participants need to be reliable and available based on the demands and needs of the particular community. Identity is also a concern in communities where keyboards mediate personhood: who are we really talking to? This concern weighs against the anonymity inherent in CMC and which is often a positive feature for the spiritually and religiously marginalized, the introvert, or anyone not willing or able to enter a physical church building. There is also the question of the use of avatars as an expression of
Identity. Identity continues to be a hot topic as the interplay of self-perception, self-expression, and public perception is studied.

The fourth characteristic, netizenship, is a short-hand way of describing responsible interaction and respectful participation. Just as in face-to-face communication, particular voices can dominate, bully, and manipulate interactions. Any community has the potential for disruptive members and moments, but it is of particular concern in CMC because there is often no moderating force or alternative venue for communication. Thus, the requirement of mutual self-control is vital to an enduring community. On way to accomplish this is to require “membership” on the site as an indication of commitment, along with a login and password requirement. This adds a sense of accountability to the site and may increase the sense of self-control and authority of the community members to regulate inappropriate behaviors.

While disruptive behavior is discouraged, personal concern for others is a necessity—the fifth criterion of online community. If exchanges are always neutral, ambivalent, or impersonal they are not interactive in the sense of developing a

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relationship. They may be participatory in that a request/response format is employed, but that is also the format used in seeking information or inquiring about a commercial transaction. The participation must reflect a concern for the lives, interests, and well-being of the other participant(s) in order to be considered personal involvement.

The final criterion is that of shared experience, or put another way, participatory communication within the larger online community. Private conversations are not bad or to be discouraged, of course, but they do not create or sustain a community. If is only when a group of participants connect over common themes or experiences that a community is born and maintained. Private email exchanges, therefore, could not be the basis for a community. BBS and some forms of instant messaging could be, whether synchronous or asynchronous, because they are open and available to all participants.

Dawson acknowledges that this is not a definitive set of criteria for Internet communities, but that it does evaluate the criteria we might require of a physical gathering and applies it to emerging online communities. Applying these criteria to websites will hopefully serve to distinguish between sites that do not offer, or provide, the content for this sort of relationship and those whose goal is to offer relationship and content. The number of sites to which these criteria can be applied include a huge spectrum of style and content, and a range of depth that is considerable. The PEW report Cyberfaith offers a third way to limit the range of sites by listing the “favorite” sites of

29 Dawson, 85.
religious and spiritual surfers. These include: single denomination or institution, ecumenical, devout, skeptical, commercial, those tied to religiously oriented organizations, those oriented to religious approaches to social and political issues, those focused on ecclesiastical matters, and those which included religious material as part of more secular content.\textsuperscript{30} Despite the fact that these categories were suggested in a publication dated 2001, they still cover the range of sites found today. To illustrate that point and to indicate how these categories fit into web searches, I offer the following table as a way to collage the type of site, its origin and purpose, and selected examples.

\textbf{Table 10. Religious Websites: Descriptive Characteristics and Examples}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of religious site</th>
<th>Description of site</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Single denomination or institution           | Street based; related to a physical congregation or denomination, though not necessarily sponsored by a single physical congregation | - i.ucc at http://i.ucc.org/  
-LifeChurch.tv at http://www.lifechurch.tv/ (Evangelical Covenant Church)  
-Third Way Café at http://www.thirdway.com/ (Mennonite)  
-Church of Fools at http://churchoffools.com/ (United Methodist Church of Great Britain)  
-Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, PCUSA at http://www.emmanuelnyc.org/  
-First Baptist Church of Maryville, IL at http://www.fbmaryville.org/  
-Monastery of Christ in the Desert at http://christdesert.org/ (Benedictine)  
-Sacred Space at http://sacredspace.ie/ (Jesuit) |
| Ecumenical                                   | Sites not aligned with a particular denomination and may in fact advocate            | -TheOOZE at http://www.theooze.com/main.cfm  
-Beliefnet at http://www.beliefnet.com/  
-National Council of Churches at |

\textsuperscript{30} “Cyberfaith,” 17.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Devout but non-denominational</th>
<th>Advocate a recognizable sense of Christian faith though not necessarily with traditional form or language, or they may be very traditional but not affiliated with a denomination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skeptical/humorous</td>
<td>Recognizably Christian but unorthodox in the treatment of faith concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Includes a variety of resources that are both denominationally based and independent; includes sponsored, paid advertising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tied to a religious oriented institution</td>
<td>May have a particular Christian agenda but the purpose of the site is to inform or advocate for a non-ecclesial institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious approach to social and political issues</td>
<td>Christian in theology but not affiliated with any one denomination or ecclesial body</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Ecclesiastical matters | Cyber-representatives of a particular denomination or tradition; includes denominational websites | -Vatican at http://www.vatican.va/  
-denominational headquarters websites |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Religious material amidst secular information | Recognizable Christian materials embedded in sites not committed to particular religious or spiritual organizations and their existence | -Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page  
-Religion News Service at http://www.religionnews.com/ ("The only secular news and photo service devoted to unbiased coverage of religion and ethics—exclusively") |
| Social Networking Sites | Interactive sites designed for meeting others with shared interests or mutual goals; designed for Christian participants | Mychurch.org  
lifespace.cc  
faithlight.com  
xianz.com |
| Virtual worlds | Non-physically based communities that exist in graphic display with the use of self-designed avatars | -Second Life at http://secondlife.com/  
-St. Pixel’s at http://www.stpixels.com/view_releases.cgi  
-Church of Fools at http://churchoffools.com/ |


Clearly there are too many types of sites with too many forms and functions to be able to look at each one in depth. In an attempt to focus solely on computer mediated communities that are not based in “street” congregations I propose to look at five sites which meet the several criteria set out by Helland and Dawson, and which fall within the PIP report’s list of favorite religious/spiritual sites and make use of a variety of interactive computer applications:
These five sites will include in some way the following characteristics:

- Helland’s definition of “Online Religion:” a religious/spiritual site that is primarily interactive rather than informative/resource based, and one that is not the vehicle of particular “street” congregation
- Dawson’s six criteria for a virtual community: interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, netizenship, personal concern for others, and shared experience
- The availability of a variety of interactive computer applications which may include, but are not limited to, video, audio, vocal, blogs, BBS, IM chat, wikis, and animation
- Includes group activities such as study groups, social opportunities, prayer opportunities, and worship opportunities as well as opportunities for conversation and connection
- Will have both synchronous and asynchronous formats

Many of these criteria overlap, or cannot even be imagined without the presence of particular applications. For example, the BBS system has become ubiquitous in the establishment of prayer request opportunities, and instant messaging is a popular way to maintain synchronous contact during any number of social and worship experiences. It should also be noted that these particular criteria are fluid and malleable: they change quickly with the evolution of new technology and creative usage. And finally, it must be noted that a variety of functions can be met by a limited number of applications, which is to say that the level of sophistication of a particular site is not the determining factor in meeting the definition of a cyber-church. Familiar and “old-fashioned” applications may be able to sustain the same type of community involvement that cutting edge technology
encourages. Each of the sites to be analyzed combines the use of both old and new applications. It is this very fluidity and intermingling of tradition and innovation that makes the cyber-church community very much like its predecessor, the street church and makes this discussion very familiar.

**i.ucc**

The heading on this United Church of Christ (UCC) site says “God is still speaking,” with an emphasis on the comma as a symbol of God’s ongoing relationship with creation (Figure 1.1) This is the same slogan used in street congregations affiliated with the UCC.31

The center of the page is dominated by an ad for an upcoming spirituality conference. The left side of the page is devoted to “What’s New” in a text-based bulleted format with hyperlinks. The right side has three categories listed in a large font: Interact, Gather, Subscribe. Each of these includes links to additional pages. At the bottom of the home page in bold font is “**i.ucc** a community for your faith journey” which is a hyperlink to a “welcome” page with a self-description. The very top of the homepage includes ten tabs leading to the interactive sites as well as to additional resources and the UCC home page.

The two side columns on the front page offer the same information in different ways. Each link leads to interactive features, including a “Real-Time Prayer Chapel”

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31 Websites are extremely dynamic and change constantly. The date the website was analyzed will be noted, but the content will not necessarily be available for future observation. i.ucc was analyzed on May 28, 2009.
(9:00 p.m. ET, daily; 12 noon ET, weekdays), the Spirit Café blog, a weekly Bible Blog, and e-cards. When the chapel service is not occurring, prayer requests can be posted or a registered user can communicate through a variety of forums/blogs. In order to participate in any interactive applications listed here one must register.

In terms of interactive opportunities this site offers a variety of options, yet it would not compel a visitor to stay on the site because of its visual appeal. It is not a particularly visually graphic site: true to its Reformed heritage it is very verbal and text oriented. But there are links to graphics and galleries as the webmaster deems appropriate. The content of the site includes—in addition to the forthrightly interactive features—a variety of ways to become familiar with the UCC (for example, “Opening the Bible,” “UCC 101,” and “What Does Faith have to do with Justice?”), and most of these pages link to additional information sites as well as to resources for further study or volunteer opportunities. There are also links to a variety of devotional resources (for example, “Weekly Seeds,” “Daily Devotionals,” and “Still Speaking Devotional;” (Figure 1.2).

Of particular interest to this study is its self-description under “Feed Your Spirit” (top, Figure 1.1) or when you click the front page hyperlink “A community for your faith journey:”

WELCOME TO i.UCC
an online community sponsored by the United Church of Christ
What’s an "online community?" Frankly, we're not quite sure, but we're hoping you can show us.
"Community" is an elusive and often-abused concept: sometimes e-commerce sites on the Internet use the word simply to mean any niche market to which they
can sell products and services. Are seekers for spiritual truth a "niche market?" We don't think so. One dictionary defines "community" as "sharing, participation, fellowship." That works for us. Community is a place where you can find relationships. But it's more than that. It's a place where people can build together, create together, grow together. Community isn't just a place to talk—though you'll discover soon enough that in the United Church of Christ we love to talk!

No, community is more than that. It's an experience of relationship. So our community, like any other, is incomplete without the participation of its members. As an experiment in online community, i.UCC will grow and change in time as its members build it together. That's why we can't tell you yet exactly what i.UCC will be in the future. That depends partly on you—if you want to walk with us for awhile as you continue your own spiritual journey. There are no rules for participation in i.UCC (apart from the normal rules of civility): no fees, no tests, no questionnaires. We won't pressure you for contributions, we'll send you no unsolicited emails, and we'll respect your privacy. You're free to read all of the forums and blogs we provide throughout i.UCC. If you want to participate—in an online learning experience, for example, or in a conversation on any subject—we'll ask you to register: but we won't ask for any personal information apart from your name, email address and zip code. Your email address will be used merely to confirm your registration and will not be published online or used without your consent. We also recommend a free subscription to our "Weekly Seeds" opt-in mailing list—but that's entirely your choice.32

This presentation is in contrast to the preliminary self description offered in the previous version of the site:

No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you're welcome here! Do you need a place you can call home? A place to hope, to ask questions, to find God? For more than 1.4 million people, the United Church of Christ is that place. So you're welcome here! The best way to experience the UCC is to spend some time with one of our congregations, or local churches. We're gathered in nearly 5,700 of these communities in 50 states and Puerto Rico. But maybe you can't find a UCC congregation where you live. Or maybe you want to test the waters first. i.UCC could be for you: an experience of community where you can connect with others—just as you are.33

This introduction is coupled with the question “Why am I here?” and a link “find a congregation.” The message conveyed by these few words was that this website, while a community perhaps, was not a “real” congregation. It is a rest-stop on the road to a true community. While this introduction was revised sometime before December 11, 2006, the language used continued to make a subtle distinction between community and congregation for many months.

i.ucc is clear about who can participate and how that can be done. Anyone can read what is posted in a blog or in the chapel, but only those who are registered can participate. It is not clearly stated as to why this is a requirement, though it surely has the effect of limiting participation to those who are interested enough to make the effort to do so. Registration does offer a sense of accountability and stability because it is way of committing to the community, however loosely. It will also offer the webmaster the opportunity to exercise authority if need be in the face of inappropriate behavior. At the bottom of the “Feed Your Spirit” welcome page, standards and procedures are established: “i.UCC.org is (c) copyright the United Church of Christ. Please do not use the forums and comment function on this website to post an ad hominem comment, i.e., an attack on another person or group. Please do not use this website to advertise services or goods for sale. The owners of this website reserve the right to delete any user comment or forum message which violates this policy or which they otherwise deem to be

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33 Internet Archive page dated April 21, 2006, the first time i.ucc is archived here http://web.archive.org/web/20060421203659/http://i.ucc.org/ (accessed July 5, 2009).
inappropriate. The owners also reserve the right to delete or block the account of any user if necessary.”

Despite its range of interactive options, there is no “worship service” offered, and no sacramental participation. There is no obvious explanation as to why these are absent, though with a reading of the history and theology links one could, perhaps, formulate a response. To a new visitor unfamiliar with the United Church of Christ, however, it could be read as a lack of emphasis on ritual and worship, a lack of interest or concern with the sacraments, or as an indication that even though i.ucc is a “community,” it does not offer the same features as a street congregation and is therefore not quite “real.”

LifeChurch.tv

LifeChurch.tv does not present itself in the typical way a “church” might present itself (Figure 2.1). No crosses are visible on the website. No evangelistic messages, no long blocks of text with information and resources. The banner at the top of the homepage states its name and offers a brief description: One church. Multiple locations. The center graphic, which consumes most of the homepage, relates to its current sermon/discussion series. The top right corner of the homepage has a digital clock counting down to the next live “experience.” At the bottom of the page are five hyperlink choices:

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34 i.ucc, “About US”

• I’m new to LifeChurch.tv
• I’m a regular to LifeChurch.tv
• I want to try Church online
• I want to Watch messages
• I’m looking for Church Resources

The first two tabs offer, among other things, a choice of thirteen campuses where communities gather, plus the church online. “New to LifeChurch.tv” offers a brief welcome message to introduce the church: “LifeChurch.tv is a group of people from all walks of life who are being transformed by Jesus Christ. Every week, we join together around the world to worship God and to experience a relevant and powerful message, which teaches truths from the Bible. We are passionate about sharing the love of Christ by caring for each other and positively impacting our communities. Through satellite broadcasts that enable all of our twelve locations to be connected as one, LifeChurch.tv is a multi-site church that transcends metropolitan regions.”

This page also includes links to staff, “About Us,” “Our History,” and “What We Believe.” If you select the “Church Online” tab you are linked to the online campus (Figure 2.2; Figures 2.3-9 continue the homepage of the “Church Online” tab). Selecting this option takes you to the Church Online homepage with articles, blogs, an introductory video, and the times of live worship experiences permanently displayed. A bar of hyperlinks across the top offer the choices of “Home,” “Lifegroups,” “Lifemissions,” “Serve,” “Giving,” “London,” Contact,” “Volunteer Central,” “Times,” and “Resources.” The small print in the upper

right corner include “Get Connected,” “What’s Next,” and “Donate/Give.” Each page offers a different aspect of the Online Church, though each page offers similar opportunities to connect on various social networking sites, BBS chats, and blogs. Each page also has a variety of videos pertinent to the topic of the page (Bible study, mission, etc.), and each page references the sermon/discussion series. When it is time for an “experience,” clicking on “Church Online” takes you directly to the “live experience.”

The live experience is the worship service of a multi-site church. Each site, whether geographical or virtual, has a worship leader. The Online campus has its own pastor, Brandon Donaldson, but it imports via video all aspects of the worship experience, of which music is an important element. The sermon is shared by all campuses and is produced by the lead pastors (on May 31, 2009 it was a sermon on the theme of depression, focused on Elijah, and offered by the founding pastor Craig Groeschel). The video of the sermon, or any of the worship leadership, is directed specifically upon the speaker. There is no scanning of the audience or physical space, which gives the viewer the sense that the preacher is speaking directly to you. The viewer is the intended audience. This video of the worship experience—music and other leadership—is on the left side of the screen. The right side of the screen contains a live chat focused on the sermon or current spiritual concerns and needs. There are also places to ask for personal prayer or for help in an email format. There is also a way to access a map of global users at the moment, notes on the message being offered, and a place for connecting to LifeChurch.tv on a variety of social networking sites.
On nearly every page are options to connect via social networking applications, including email, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Second Life, Delicious, StumbleUpon, and Digg primarily. There are numerous links to live prayer, live chat, live help, and an ongoing blog. Podcasts are downloadable to your computer, MP3 player, or ipod.

Despite the immediacy of these offerings, the heart of the community is in the Lifegroups and Lifemissions. Once in the Online Campus these are only accessible through the small text at the right top, “Get Connected.” This page describes the different functions of the group options:

- **LifeGroups**: LifeGroups are the weekly gathering of a few people to study the Bible, pray for each other, and encourage each other to become fully devoted to Jesus Christ.

- **LifeMissions**: As fully devoted followers of Christ we are called to feed the poor, comfort the suffering, attend to the sick and to reach the lost.

- **Serve/Volunteer**: Each and every week God is changing lives at LifeChurch.tv. These stories of transformation wouldn’t be complete without the volunteers who give their time and energy to make a difference.

- **Communications**: If you want to stay up to date with the LifeChurch.tv Online Community there are two ways you can stay connected. You can Sign up to our Weekly Email Newsletter or you can subscribe to our blog updates through Email by RSS or by visiting the blog throughout your week.\(^\text{37}\)

LifeGroups are the way to connect to small groups, either in physical or online gatherings. Users can search by location (both physical and online), day and time, or issue/interest. One option offered through LifeGroups is that of hosting “Watch Parties.”

A Watch Party is a group invited to enjoy an “experience” together. The experience is not referred to as worship. It can be thought of as an evangelical moment, an opportunity to build community, or a teaching moment. A variety of resources are offered to help lead a Watch Party, as well as for other group activities. Life missions are also an important dimension of LifeChurch.tv, both because of the teachings of the gospel and because of the chance to work with other Christians.

Visually there are few Christian symbols. The space behind the musicians and worship leaders looks more like a setting for a rock band than a worship space. There are no crosses. There are no candles or alters. The worship leaders and preachers are dressed informally, with not liturgical garb at all. Yet the language that is used, both audibly and in print, is highly traditional. Prayer, spirituality, Jesus Christ, salvation, surrender, Scripture…references to all these aspects of Christianity are plentiful. In addition, when the Online campus is worshipping, the “local” pastor is speaking to that particular community and not to a physically gathered group in one building. By acknowledging the dispersed physicality and networked reality of the gathered community, this language creates a feeling of welcome and inclusion.

As a whole this site is very user-friendly and full of the latest ways to communicate both publically and privately. The user has access to staff, trained volunteers, and other members of the community. Graphics are plentiful, though most of the content is still text based. There is, however, a significant use of video and audio applications which relieves the emphasis on the text. Anyone can use the site: login and
registration is not required to participate in an Experience or to enter a chat room or instant messaging. You do have to offer a “nickname” in order to participate, but it does not appear to be a form of registration. In order to receive email updates for news, announcements, or blogs an email address must be submitted. This is also true if you joining a LifeGroup or Lifemission.

This lack of accountability and relaxed sense of control falls just outside of the criteria established by Dawson in the call for stability of membership and accountability. There is also no obvious access to information about the beliefs of the community or its religious affiliation. This is in contrast to the ease of access to the video messages, blogs, chats, and the list of campuses available through the click of the mouse. This does not detract from the message being delivered, but can be an issue if affiliation or doctrine is important to the user. But because there are so many ways to interact with others on this site—or with the site itself—this is unlikely to be a deterrent to a religious surfer or spiritual seeker.

Friday Study Ministries

Along side its name is the self-description: “First Church on the Net.” (Figure 3.1) The community is also identified on the homepage by the name of the Senior Pastor, Ron Beckham, and a physical address, and a statement of mission and a brief set of goals: “Friday Study Ministries, The First Church on the Internet, is an outreach to the worldwide mission field, internet users, travelers, military personnel and those who have difficulty attending a traditional church, including those with disabilities and the
homebound. Friday Study Ministries is a non-denominational Christian Church. We offer Bible-based teaching, discipleship, prayer support and other resources. Our purpose is to share the good news - The Word of God and reach the world for Jesus Christ.”

The site is not sophisticated or graphically rich. The name of the group is at the top of the page. On the left side is a list of links for further information, and on the right side is a photo of the interior of a physical church with an invitation to “Enter.”

The links at the left are the way to discover more about the community and its beliefs:

- How to Receive Christ: After a brief text on Romans 9, 10 and 11 and a prayer, the user has the option to either receive now Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior or to re-commit.
- Weekly Bulletin (Figure 3.2): This is the main source of information about Friday Study Ministries and its beliefs. The page is divided into seven categories: Prayers (which includes online options), Outreach, Teachings, Commitment (which includes rites for Baptism and Communion – for the physically disabled or a traditional format), About Our Church, Donate, and How to receive weekly studies by email.
- Bible Studies: Studies based on specific books of the Bible, plus a special option for new believers.
- Sermons: The most recent months are listed by date, scripture, and title. Sermons dating through 2000 are indexed by both scriptural reference and title. The sermons for the current year are available in text and in audio format.
- Devotional: a written reflection by one of the organizations pastors and an invitation to join in study.
- Podcasts: Available through a link to the ITunes store.

To click on the picture of the interior of a physical church is to be directed to the Weekly Bulletin page (Figure 3.2), with the same list of options noted above.

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The only way to interact on this site is through email (prayer requests and questions) or phone call (a local number for a conference-call bible study). A user can be visually engaged by reading the text, or audibly engaged by listening to sermons, music, and podcasts, but there is no synchronous form of interaction offered. This site does, however, offer two types of communication not found on the other sites analyzed here. The first is JAWS – a software application for the visually impaired that reads aloud the content on the screen. The second is a form of connection not found on any of the other sites analyzed in this project: a spiritual connection based on sacramental engagement.

The rites for Baptism and Communion are accessed through either a click on the church interior on the homepage or through “Weekly Bulletin.” In the category labeled “Commitment” there are three choices: how to receive Christ, Baptism, and Communion. In each case the process assumes an internal spiritual engagement with Scripture and the Triune God. Receiving Christ\(^{39}\) is possible by reading the assigned scripture, prayer and reflection, and then an intentional decision made by clicking the two possible options. There is no option for a decline of the invitation: you can only choose to agree or navigate to a new page.

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Baptism\textsuperscript{40} is introduced with the questions: Have you ever wondered about the baptism of Jesus? A brief homily is offered on Jesus and baptism, about love and trust in Jesus as savior with baptism as a visual sign of our commitment to Him and a way to proclaim to the world His love. The author offers a paragraph on the use of water in baptism, noting that immersion is best but not always possible, and that a cup of water will do. This description implies the presence of more than one person, but it is not explicit and does not mention the need for an ecclesiastical presence. With baptism the believer will receive faith, forgiveness, salvation, God the Father, the Holy Spirit of God, Eternal life, Sanctification, Suffering, Persecution, Love, Joy, Peace, “and more.” After reading these descriptions, and administering water, the page concludes: “When you receive Him, you're telling the world that we should receive Him, too. Do you receive Him now? --- I do. I baptize you in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The services for Communion\textsuperscript{41} are introduced with a more lengthy description and a brief prayer of confession before offering two different options, one for the physically challenged and one traditional. The introductory page explains this:

Jesus said, "Do this, in remembrance of Me" - Luke 22:19

\textsuperscript{40} Friday Study Ministries, “Commitment: Baptism”

\textsuperscript{41} Friday Study Ministries, “Commitment: Communion”
We have more than one form of Communion because our outward needs are not precisely the same. But we have one Lord and His Name is Jesus Christ. The outward form is less important for He is our need. To receive Communion is to understand and recognize the total necessity for the One who died for you and for me. We are not to "eat the bread or drink the cup in an unworthy manner" (1 Corinthians 11:27), which means that we must truly belong to Him, in order to share in this time. Please pray:

You know we are sinners, Lord, and we have come to understand our utter need of You. We confess our sins, Lord Jesus, and we receive You now. Thank You, Father. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Please join in Communion.

“Communion for the Physically Challenged” is offered in narrative form, both enacting and describing the ritual. During the course of the text it says: “If you cannot do it, and are alone, then just receive Him in your heart. (The reality is in the heart). Lord, bless these elements for our use, and let us see the reality of Christ, in them.” “Traditional” Communion is, indeed, based on a traditional format with familiar language and few extra instructions. There is no indication about how to prepare the bread and cup, or what form they should take. It does indicate when they should be used. The text does not suggest the presence of more than the individual communicant.

This site meets very few of the criteria set out by Dawson, especially in its lack of interactivity in a synchronous format, or with any sense of accountability, stability, or identity. There are no requirements to login or register or communicate with others in any way. The choice of participating in a humanly relational community is optional. Community with God through scripture, prayer, and sacraments, however, is emphasized as an individual decision that may or may not include others.
Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua

Welcome to the Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua (VCBC)! This is a sacred place in cyberspace named after a little old dog with cataracts, who barked sideways at strangers, because he couldn't see where they were. We humans relate to God in the same way, making a more or less joyful noise in God's general direction, and expecting a reward for doing so. Hence our creed: We can't be right about everything we believe. Thank God, we don't have to be!42

And so begins a visit to the Virtual church of the Blind Chihuahua (Figure 4.1).

At the top of the home page is the name of the Church and a happy little dog in sunglasses. Below him reads “More to religion than pleasing your imaginary friend.”

With these introductory statements it remains unclear whether the site is a Christian organization or not. Upon clicking the various links it becomes clear that this is a site of exploration and humor with a tendency towards cynicism along with a desire to consider the knowledge of God from a variety of perspectives. As they describe themselves and their purpose:

We are dedicated to enlarging religion as a source of inspiration and diminishing religion as a source of conflict in the world. This means we each practice the religion (or none) to which we are called, and we help each other do likewise. We do this because we admit that, like the little Blind Chihuahua, none of us gets our religion exactly right, and we want to learn from each other. We invite all people of good will to participate, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, etc. We even welcome moral relativists, although we think they have eaten more from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil than they admit. If you are put off by the usual approaches to religion or are leaving Fundamentalism, this site may be for you.

Our Guiding Principles are that Science is about Facts, Religion is about Meaning, and Humor is about Us. We adopt them because we think many conflicts are started by people who take themselves too seriously, who manufacture meaning from idols of their imaginations, and who try to force others to accept that meaning as fact. So, come in. Refresh yourself from our bin for donations of canned theology to feed the poor in spirit. Then arm yourself, as we do, with the Courage to be Ridiculous before God™ and explore VCBC. Here are some hints: Click and ye shall find. 
Bring your brain and sense of humor. 
(Figure 4.2)

With some perseverance, it becomes clear that this site is managed by a free-thinking and unidentified member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, though the site itself is unaffiliated with any denomination or established church. The language is tinged with Christian allusion and symbolism, but makes use of a variety of other symbols and styles as well.

The home page is primarily text based. At the center of the page is the introduction and purpose (noted above) and a variety of ways to link to the different pages. The main categories listed as tabs at the top of the page are:

- Home
- Blog: “Blind Chihuahua Brain Drops” by the webmaster
- Chapel: “Welcome to our Chapel, where we keep traditional and original devotional aids primarily — but not exclusively — for those called to Christianity. Browse here unconstrained by the order of ordinary churches, which must finish their services in time for little league. It was once common for Christian monks, nuns, and friars to pray eight times a day, memories of which survive in the liturgies here. The deepest experiences, however, go beyond words and images.”

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- Dogpac: the “political paw” of the VCBC
- Forum: bulletin board chats
- Gallery: images
- Graveyard: resources for the time of dying
- Restroom: humor
- School: resources
- Scriptorium: writings, but not Scripture

On the left side of the page is a drop down menu for information and resources for several world religions and more bits of humor. On the right side are advertisements. At the bottom of the page are a number of other links “to get you started.”

The Chapel is the most explicitly Christian segment of the site. It offers liturgies from a variety of Christian traditions, prayers, sermons, lectionaries, scripture, background information, and a baptismal font and alter rail link. At these last two links are brief meditations on the meaning of the sacraments as opposed to an invitation to engage in the sacraments. There is no “space” provided for worship or meditation.

There is an interesting link located under “site” at the top right corner of each page. Clicking that will take you to the site map, and on the left side of the page is a link to a “floor plan” for the church. And indeed, a hyperlinked floor plan emerges, labeled in the manner of a traditional church. Clicking on the “pulpit” takes you to sermons, the “choir” takes you to hymns, the “alter” to a reflection on the meaning of communion. It does not offer new information—it can all be located by clicking on the tabs of the homepage—but it is an interesting use of a traditional symbol to lead users to informational sites.
The interactive portions of this site are minimal. There is no place for prayer requests, and no instant messaging. The interactive portions of this site are located on the blog page and the forum page. To use the forum page you must register. The blog site “Blind Chihuahua Brain Droppings” has links to other blogs, including “Postsermon: Put yourself in the Pulpit,” which is also sponsored by the VCBC. These blogs, chat forums, and email are the only ways to interact with others.

St. Pixels: Church of the Internet

As of July 1, 2009 St. Pixels became an independent church, separating from its initial supporter, the United Methodist Church of Great Britain (Figure 5.1-2). Proud of its independence, it is also proud of its intent: “Imagine church with no cobwebs, wooden pews, hymn books, overhead projector, leaking roof, organ fund…or even church building. That's where you are right now. Welcome to St Pixels, the online church where you can meet others, talk about serious and not-so-serious stuff, discuss what you do and don't believe, go to regular services, and join a pioneering worldwide community.”

The homepage is set up similarly to the other sites analyzed, with a banner heading and tabs linking the user to additional content. The page is divided into three segments. The center is primarily text, featuring a welcome statement, a comment about social justice, and a brief listing of recent blog entries. The left side has a graphic welcome and the words of introduction mentioned above as well as suggestions for how

to get started on the site. The right side has login information and the current time in St. Pixel’s world.

The top of the home page offers links other pages and away to access “St. Pixel’s Live” when you click the angel at the top right corner of the homepage. St. Pixel’s Live offers a floor plan of the church and information about how to establish an account and login. Participation in the Live community involves adopting a screen name and creating an avatar. Anyone over sixteen years of age can join the community.

The links at the top of the page include Discover, Interact, Blog, Discuss, Reflect, Worship, Support Us, New, and Site Plan. The Discover link is the place to learn how to use the site, the “core values” at St. Pixel’s, common questions, history of the church, and where “live meets” are occurring. The “Core Values” of St. Pixel’s are clearly stated and serve as the basis for all social interaction among participants. The page begins with a statement of belief: “God is revealed to seekers by many different means, including creation, the Bible, the life of Jesus and the Spirit-filled witness of the Church. St Pixels is one expression of that historical, international and universal Church. We aim to create sacred space on the Internet where we can seek God together, enjoy each other's company and reflect God's love for the world. Those of any belief or none are welcome to take part

in our activities, providing they accept the Christian focus of our community and respect other participants.\textsuperscript{46}

The core values that are the basis for interaction include:

- **Respect:** You have a right to your opinions. You do not have to reveal more of yourself than you wish. You can decide if and when you want to end any conversation or discussion. You should not become the victim of aggressive behaviour. Please treat other users with the same respect, remembering that there is a real person behind each screen name and each online identity.

- **Tolerance and diversity:** People come here from all sorts of backgrounds and church traditions. They may hold different views on issues that you feel strongly about, and they may express themselves in different ways to you. We view this positively – in fact many of our users are attracted to St Pixels by the diversity of beliefs and styles.

- **Constructive dialogue:** We believe that exchanging opinions and experiences can help each of us to learn about God, others and ourselves. We therefore do everything possible to cultivate a climate on the site that is conducive to such exchanges.

- **Leadership:** St Pixels is run by volunteers who give freely of their time to enable this space to remain open to the public. It is their job to interpret and apply the Core Values. Please help them to do their job by complying with their requests or instructions.

- **Legal compliance:** St Pixels aims to operate within the various national and international laws governing websites such as ours. The responsibility for doing this rests with the site leadership, but there are implications for each user.

The Interact page is in many ways the heart of St. Pixels, for here lodges many of the key means of interaction and a way to get to know the community. Categories include:

- **Stand By Me:** prayer requests and a place to note life situations
- **Fridge Door:** birthdays, events, news
- **Real Life Meets:** planned gatherings of St. Pixel community members
- **Bouncy Castle:** humor and fun\textsuperscript{47}


\textsuperscript{47}
The Blog page offers ongoing blogs and the opportunity to begin your own. There is also a means of commenting on blogs. You must be registered to participate in this format. The Discussion page offers additional ways to get involved and interact, this time focused on BBS formats with ongoing topics.

Under “Reflect” is theological and ecclesiological discussion. Topics range from the interpretation of scripture, to social issues, to the meaning of a virtual church. For example, there is a discussion of “The Realtime Church.” The page states: “In this reflection, we'll be looking at the theory and practice of being a living, worshipping community online using our new and evolving software. We are currently looking at how different aspects of St Pixels 'work' in spiritual terms, the latest topic being rites and symbols.” As with almost every page and every topic available at St. Pixel’s, there is an opportunity to post comments on the subject.

The Worship page offers a calendar of worship events as well as their times and “Location” in the church. It is essentially a “newsletter” for the Live worship community. Topics that are being discussed are also included, as well as who is leading worship. Announcements are included about social justice issues and other areas of interest to the community. Like a physically based church, there are particular worship


times as well as times for silent prayer, community prayer, “coffee morning” and coffee breaks. There are also study groups and service opportunities. There is a way to offer praise, ask for prayers, and discuss spiritual journeys and spiritual needs. Bible readings are also offered.

By clicking on the support us page, you are taken to the St. Pixel store, or to Amazon, with the opportunity to use US or UK currency. There is also a way to give directly to St. Pixels. There are no advertisements on this site.

**Conclusion**

Each of these five sites claims to be an online community of faith, offering a variety of interactive capabilities and content that is explicitly religious. They meet the criteria for being a computer mediated community at a basic level. Each site offered more than factual information, suggesting that a successful online church will need to include more than basic information about its faith, nature, and purpose in order for it to be a resting place for net surfers and not just a click in a web search. The sites with the least interactivity (Friday Study Ministries and Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua) require a serious desire on the part of the surfer to find ways to interact. LifeChurch.tv, on the other hand, offered clear and obvious ways to interact with the site and other participants. However, the information about its theological positions and expositions was difficult to locate. Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua was the most difficult to read theologically because of its inclusion of information on a variety of Christian and non-Christian faiths and practices. The presence of so much information outside of the
Christian perspective could render it less church-like, despite its use of Christian terms and a church floor plan (as a navigational tool) reminiscent of a brick and mortar church.

The interplay of information and interactivity are somehow essential in the distinction between a community site and a site that is a source of information. Dawson is correct in naming his six criteria for a cyber-community with sustained interaction at its heart. A requirement of community is to be gathered and relational in some way, even if it primarily for the sharing of information. Without that, the site (physical or virtual) is a stopping place rather than a dwelling place.

This is not to say that these five sites can be determined as ecclesial communities based on interactive criteria alone. It does, however, emphasize the necessity for any ecclesial community to be able to claim a variety of ways to communicate and connect. How that connectivity is developed and defined is largely bound up with the history and traditions of the denominational ecclesiologies in the background of the online church. To understand the ecclesiological assumptions of these and other sites, a brief review of the Reformed Tradition is needed. As noted in the Introduction, the Reformed Tradition is not the only ecclesiology in the United States, but it is a pervasive force in both our religious and social spheres. With even a minimal review of Reformed ecclesiology it will be possible to identify contexts and issues that are essential considerations in determining the ecclesiological viability of a cyber-church.
CHAPTER THREE
A BRIEF SURVEY OF REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY:

Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda
The church reformed and always to be reformed

Ecclesiology within the Reformed Tradition is a dynamic concept, refusing to be confined to one particular form or description. Indeed, even the definition of ecclesiology is neither static nor monolithic. Therefore, describing a Reformed ecclesiology is like taking aim at a moving target. Nonetheless, in order to provide a context for the consideration of a cyber-ecclesiology, I will attempt to offer a brief sketch of Reformed ecclesiology beginning in the 16th century and moving into the North American context through migration and frontier expansion and concluding with more recently formed Reformed thought from the writings of Karl Barth. Outlining the theological background implicit in many US ecclesiologies today will help establish a baseline for eventual consideration of alternative ecclesiologies. While establishing a sense of the history and divisions of Reformed traditions in the USA, I also hope to summarize major theological characteristics of the Reformed Tradition and the variety of ecclesial polities that have evolved within that general classification. A second task of this chapter will be to identify Reformed ecclesiological understandings that have become muted or overshadowed in the USA that could offer a renewal or reconsideration of ecclesiological possibilities. As a whole, I hope to offer a panoramic view of the ecclesiological landscape into which the cyber-church is extending.
The Reformed landscape is variegated and evolving, and context is everything. Unique to the Reformed Tradition is its invisibility in our various contexts and ecclesiological settings. Unlike Lutheran or Anglican reform movements which developed early in their existence an established ecclesial, doctrinal, and liturgical identity, the Reformed Tradition has not required a unified ecclesiology to be considered “Reformed.” In the US, therefore, there are a number of historically Reformed churches and distant relatives of Reformed thinking that do not identify as Reformed but carry with them an implicitly Reformed character. Brian Gerrish encapsulates this relativity and diversity in his phrase “the Reformed habit of mind.”¹ He suggests five main points to this habitus, from which, he contends, the particular ecclesiological and confessional stance for a particular time and place will be generated: deference, critical conversation, openness, practicality, and the Word of God.

The first point is deference, which he aligns closely with tradition. It is the knowledge and words of the past viewed with respect. In this case it would be a grounding in Scripture, tradition, and theology from prior generations. While lauding deference, Gerrish notes a second Reformed habit of mind: it is critical. It is both a dialogue with the past as well as an invitation to question the past with an eye on the

present. Openness is the third point of a Reformed habit of mind. It is open to a variety of sources and possibilities even when they emerge from outside of the Reformed Tradition. This led many of the early reformers to look to humanism and classical literature for understanding, as well as to look at the apostles and church fathers for direction. In turn, this often led to an emphasis on education and learning as the key to the knowledge and understanding of God. Yet book learning itself is not enough: the Reformed Tradition must also be practical. This fourth point was vitally important for John Calvin, who emphasized Christian living and piety as signs of being engaged with God. And fifthly, the Word of God is at the center of all Reformed habits. Gerrish quotes Zwingli’s Sixty-seven Articles (1523) as a succinct exposition of this quality: “All who say that the Gospel is nothing without the approbation of the Church err and slander God. The sum of the Gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ, the true Son of God, has made known to us the will of His heavenly Father, and by His innocence has redeemed us from death and reconciled us unto God.”

The uses of terms like “Word,” “Gospel,” and “scripture” was quite fluid during the development of Reformed thought, and was so from the very beginning. The “Introduction” to the Institutes notes the meaning of Calvin’s use of these words: “Usually when Calvin speaks of God’s Word, he does not differentiate it from the

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2 Ibid., 15.

canonical Scriptures. Yet if forced to define it, he would not simply point to the words spelled out on the sacred page.”⁴ Calvin wrote: “‘Word’ means the everlasting Wisdom, residing with God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth…For here we see the Word understood as the order or mandate of the Son, who is himself the eternal and essential Word of the Father.”⁵ Thus, Christ is equated with the Word, the Word is synonymous with Creator (based on John 1:1), and the Creator is the author of the written Word. For Calvin, therefore, scripture is the infallible authority of God’s self-revelation. It should be noted, however, that this is not the same as the concept of verbal inerrancy which developed in later years. Calvin emphasis was upon the message of scripture and not its choice of words.⁶

There were uses of the terms “Word” and “Gospel” other than that which Calvin employed. Some early confessions preceding Calvin, for example the *Synodical Declaration of Berne* (1532), identified Christ as the only Word of God. According to Jan Rohls, this is to be considered a reference to the “saving doctrine” of the Gospel, or the idea that it was a concrete historical event with lasting effect.⁷ This, of course, excludes any self-revelation of God outside of Christ, which was not something Calvin or the

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⁵ Ibid., I.13.7.

⁶ Ibid., liv.

general trend of Reformed thought agreed with. In general, early Reformed thought considered there to be a double revelation of works in creation and the Word of God in Christ. Over time and with the continued development of Reformed thought, there was a move away from identifying the Word of God with salvation history and a trend towards a fixed form of revelation in scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. However, by the time of the writing of the First Helvetic Confession in 1536, God’s Word is the scripture: “The holy, divine, Biblical Scripture, which is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit and delivered to the world by the prophets and apostles, is the most ancient, most perfect and loftiest teaching and alone deals with everything that serves the true knowledge, love and honor of God, as well as true piety and the making of a godly, honest, and blessed life.” Other early confessional statements do not limit the Gospel to the New Testament. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 states:

Q.18 Who is this mediator who is at the same time true God and a true and perfectly righteous man?
A. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is freely given to us for complete redemption and righteousness.
Q19. Whence do you know this?
A. From the holy gospel, which God himself revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, afterward proclaimed through the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other rites of the Old Covenant, and finally fulfilled through his own well-beloved Son.

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8 Ibid., 29-30.
9 Arthur C. Cochrane, Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 100; see also Rohls, 29-34, for additional analysis.
10 Ibid., 307-308.
The context for these shifts and fluidity within Reformed thought on the understanding of such terms as Word and God and scripture derives from multiple sources. The first is the general theological differences developed by different Reformed thinkers and their followers. It is their variety of contexts and situations that make up the second reason for the fluidity of terms. The political, social, geographical, and theological situations of different Reformed communities impacted their understanding and explanation of theological principles. A third reason was the need to establish precisely what was to be considered as scripture. Which books were to be in the canon was not yet resolved during the early years of the Reformation. Finally, the fourth reason was the need to establish an authority for their movement that would stand firm in the face of disputation and repression. As the Roman church countered Reformed thought, and as other forms of Protestantism developed and took form, all sides sought to codify their position on authority in order to establish a firm basis for their communities.11

Though each Protestant reformer followed a different path of protest against the Roman church, each one reflects the Reformed habit of mind to some degree. They also shared fundamental theological norms that transcended identification with the Reformed Tradition alone. These included a commitment to the centrality of God, a strong christocentric identity, and a dependence upon Scripture as the highest authority. These are commonly summarized by the phrases “faith alone,” “grace alone,” “Christ alone,”

11 Rohls, 35-45.
and “Scripture alone.” To these theological norms the Reformed position added a
dedication to theological “pluraformity” that permitted a wide range of expressions
within one system.12

Depending upon their geographic locale, rulers, education, religious sensibilities,
and the strength of their shared theological norms, the Reformers’ approach to reform
varied – just as their ecclesiology did. Luther, for example, proceeded on a very different
political trajectory than did Zwingli or Calvin because (among other things), their
political climates were extremely different. For instance, Luther’s teachings never
embraced the multiplicity of expressions characteristic of Reformed teaching. Nor did
Lutheranism fragment into the number of diverse communities that are found in the
Reformed tradition. Though the response of the Lutherans and Reformed was different
depending on specific circumstances, they did share a context of upheaval and unrest, a
church that was in transition, and a people that were ready for change.13

12 Edmund Za Bik, “The Challenge to Reformed Theology: A Perspective from Myanmar,” in
Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics Traditions, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker
(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 76; for more on the lack of uniformity in Reformed thought
see Jan Rohls, “Reformed Theology – Past and Future” in Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity,

13 For a more thorough review of the historical context of the Reformation, see Philip Benedict, Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism (New Haven: Yale University Press,
2002); Euan Cameron, The European Reformation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Owen Chadwick, The
Early Reformation on the Continent (Oxford: University Press, 2002); C. Scott Dixon, The Reformation in
Germany (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); John H. Leith, Introduction to the Reformed Tradition (Atlanta: John
Knox Press, 1977); Alister E. McGrath, Reformation Thought: An Introduction (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,
Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the first of the reformers to make a dramatic impact on the ecclesial and public landscape. Though Luther was not considered a part of the Reformed tradition, his protests and labors set the stage for the Reformed theologians to follow. Like most of the other reformers, he did not intend to begin a new church or to separate from the Roman church. His original intent was to protest what he felt to be abuses and heresies. For this reason, Luther did not write extensively about new church structures or organizations. He did define a two-mark definition of the church, which was consolidated and formalized in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, Article VII: Of the Church.

1. Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. 2) And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and 3) the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. 4) As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc.¹⁴

These two marks, the Gospel rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered, are shared with the leaders of other reform movements of the 16th century. As brief as this statement is, it establishes the primacy of the Word of God and the importance of the sacraments in forming a church community.

Lutheranism quickly formulated its teachings into confessional statements and creedal formulations that have remained the doctrinal standard for Lutherans. The

Augsburg Confession of 1530 is the primary confession of faith for Lutherans, and is included in the Book of Concord (1580) along with ancient creeds, catechisms, and articles of faith. Together with Luther’s writings the Book of Concord serves as a boundary within which all subsequent theological and ecclesiological developments have taken place. This is in contrast to the Reformed Tradition that has always held early writings of Reformed leaders in high esteem but has never attempted to waver from the commitment to critique human confessions and discern the Word of God at the present moment as situations and circumstances require. Therefore, the Reformed Tradition has no normative confessional statement to which all Reformed believers profess allegiance. Rather, each Reformed denomination has its preferred list of creedal and confessional statements dating from the Apostles’ Creed and onto the most contemporary expressions available.

Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) was a contemporary of Luther but employed a distinctly different theological and ecclesiological program. He was a priest for some years, but his academic preparation was primarily humanistic and included very little


16 There were times within Reformed history when confessions were elevated to the status of tests of faith, though with little lasting success. Of the Helvetic Concensus Formula of 1675 Rohls writes: “The Formula places confession and doctrinal decrees immediately next to the word of God, which is explicitly identified with the canonical text. The Formula regards the confessional writings as a binding norm of doctrine not only for contemporaries, but for all who will come after. “No one shall put forward either publicly or privately a dubious or new doctrine that has never belonged in our churches, conflicts with God’s word, the Helvetic Confession, our symbolic books, and the Canons of the Dordrecht Synod, and has not been proven and confirmed from God’s word in a public assembly of the brethren.” Rohls, 265.
monastic or scholastic influence. He was also influenced by Swiss patriotism and served as a chaplain during war.\(^{17}\) It was after his chaplaincy that he turned to “Christ and Scripture” and began to study theology and scripture rather than humanism.\(^ {18}\) The *Sixty-seven Articles* of 1523 are an early source of his position on a number of issues. Like Luther, he emphasized the Word of God in his understanding of the church (Article V). He did not, however, share Luther’s position on the sacraments (Article XVIII) and he was rigorously opposed to human tradition and ritual not originating in the Bible (Article XI, XVI). Zwingli also emphasized themes that would continue to define the Reformed Tradition, including the power and ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, the sovereignty of God, and the role of personal faith.\(^{19}\)

Though Zwingli was the first reformer to carry the mantle of Reformed theologian, he was not the lone voice among Reformed believers. Other early Reformed theologians included Martin Bucer (1491-1551) in Strasbourg, Wolfgang Capito (1478-1541) and John Oecolampadius (1482-1531) in Basel, and Guillaume Farel (1489-1565) in Strasbourg and Geneva. Despite the work of these men, their prominence is usually obscured by John Calvin (1509-1564), a second generation Reformed theologian. Calvin was French by birth, but his ministry was primarily in Swiss territory. Never trained in

\(^{17}\) For a brief description of Swiss social and political life during this time, see Benedict, 19-22.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 85-96; see also Cochrane, 36-44.
theology (but rather in law and humanism), Calvin was nonetheless a prolific author of sermons, letters, instructions, and several editions of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* offer a systematized presentation of all Christian thought necessary for the “Knowledge of God and That of Ourselves”:

> Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he ‘lives and moves’ [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God….the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.²⁰

With this opening to the final edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin essentially summarizes his theological program. Book I is entitled “The Knowledge of God the Creator.” The first two section headings to the first chapter of Book I are “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God” and “Without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self;” thereby acknowledging the mystery of—and dialectical character of—receiving and gaining knowledge. It becomes immediately clear that for Calvin all things proceed from God, including the knowledge we have of God, the revelation God has offered us of Godself in the Trinity, and our acquisition and development of self-knowledge. The very title of the first book, in using Creator rather than God, indicates the givenness of all things, including revelation, grace, and election. Humanity is also clearly reminded of its

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²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.1.1.
creatureliness, with a need for humility and reliance upon this sovereign God.\textsuperscript{21} The titles of the subsequent three books of the \textit{Institutes} which carry out his program are also indicative of his values: Book II: “The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers under the Law, and then to Us in the Gospel,” Book III: “The Way in which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits come to Us from it, and what Effects Follow,” and Book IV: “The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds us Therein.”

Within this compendium, Calvin deals with the church in Book IV, as one “external means” by which to enter the society of Christ. He begins by referring to the church as “Mother of all the Godly,” drawing directly from the work of church fathers Cyprian and Augustine.\textsuperscript{22} He also entitles the first chapter “The Necessity of the Church,” leaving no doubt that ecclesiology is of vital importance to him. He goes on to define the church similarly to Luther: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not be doubted, a church of God exists [cf. Eph. 2:20].”\textsuperscript{23} As did Luther and Zwingli, Calvin anchors his definition of the church in the Word of God and the sacraments. He does expand the basic Protestant definition of the church in two

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 35-37.

\textsuperscript{22} See fn10 of VI.1.4 for additional information about these references; also David C. Steinmetz “The theology of John Calvin” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology}, eds. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 122-123.

\textsuperscript{23} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.1.9.
additional ways. Not only does he indicate the value of the *proclamation* of the Word, but also the *hearing* of the Word. He also specifies that the sacraments must be administered “according to Christ’s institution.” In doing this Calvin is further emphasizing the Word as the sole foundation and authority of all things in the church, thereby dismissing any humanly created rituals or traditions that command authority.

While following the magisterial reformers in defining the church through the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments, Calvin also emphasizes the concept of “discipline” and “order.” He uses “discipline” in two senses. In the first he is referring to personal and corporate piety, which is a foundational theme throughout the *Institutes*. Book One, chapter two begins with his understanding of piety as a sign of God’s presence: “It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride is innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured.”24 He defines piety more thoroughly later in the chapter, saying “I call ‘piety’ that reverence joined with love of God which the

24 Ibid., I.1.2.
knowledge of his benefits induces.”

“The Sum of the Christian Life,” as he calls chapter seven of Book III, is devoted to the form and function of piety.

The second use of “discipline” is in the sense of church governance and structure, as in how to maintain a disciplined community. This topic takes up a significant portion of Book IV. As important as it was to Calvin, he never included either discipline or order in his definition of the church, though he would frequently lift it up as an important aspect of faithful Christian life. Chapter Twelve of Book IV, “The Discipline of the Church: Its Chief Use in Censures and Excommunication,” points to the disciplinary aspect of discipline rather than to the content of the disciplined life. Subsequent Reformed theologians would include discipline as a mark of the church, thereby giving discipline an emphasis far beyond Calvin’s initial presentation. For example John Knox of Scotland included it in the definition of the church in the *Scots Confession* (1560):

The notes of the Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed Himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished. Then wherever these notes are seen and continue for any time, be the number complete or not, there, beyond any doubt, is the true Kirk.

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25 Ibid., I.2.1.

26 Cochrane, 176-177.
Discipline was included in prominent confessions of faith from the earliest dates, as in *The First Helvetic Confession* of 1536, section fourteen, and more famously in Article XXIX of *The Belgic Confession of Faith* (1561) and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), Chapter 25, section three.

For Calvin however, discipline was a “practical” expression of the church, found in Christian living and piety, and was not a mark of the church. He may have excluded the requirements of a particular discipline in order to free his understanding of church for local contextual variations. If that was not his intention, it certainly had the effect of being portable and adaptable in a way that more specific disciplines did not. Even though he did not mandate discipline or any particular church governance or polity, in contrast to Zwingli or Luther, Calvin wrote extensively about the order of church government, basing his four-fold structure on the offices of pastor, presbyter, elder, and deacon found in the New Testament.\(^\text{27}\) His was a plan of total governance that maintained both doctrine and lifestyle. Despite its prominence in his writings and in Geneva, it is notably absent from his fundamental description of the church.

There are a number of other significant theological themes that emerge in Calvin’s writings that have direct bearing on his understanding of the nature and identity of the church. Though I am unable to explore any of them in depth here, I will mention briefly six doctrines that remain a part of the Reformed Tradition: the visible and

\(^\text{27}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.3.4-9.
invisible church, election, the Holy Spirit, piety, the Word of God, the sovereignty of
God, and a christocentric position.

With the discussion of the visible and invisible church, Calvin is embarking on a
subject that dates back to Augustine and his use of this language. Augustine’s position
can be described in various ways. One way is to think of the invisible church as made up
of those who have been effectively touched by divine grace interiorly, and the visible
church as the external reception of the means of grace found in the church. At times it
has been described as the difference between the “true” church of faith as opposed to the
visible, organized church. A more eschatological interpretation sees the invisible church
as that which will be at the end of times and the visible church as that which exists now.
Calvin’s use of the visible and invisible church is to indicate the co-existence of the
visible and invisible church, noting that that the invisible church resides within the visible
church (though is not necessarily bounded by the visible church) and is known only to
God. In his treatment of this topic he draws heavily upon the doctrines of election and
upon the means of grace offered in the church, as well as the requirement for all
Christians to honor the visible church even with its flaws:

How we are to judge the church visible, which falls within our knowledge is, I
believe, already evident from the above discussion. For we have said that Holy
Scripture speaks of the church in two ways. Sometimes by the term “church” it

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28 I am indebted to Christian Link’s chapter “The Notae Ecclesiae: A Reformed Perspective,” in
Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics Traditions, ed. David Willis and Michael Welker
(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 244-49 for this discussion, as well as Alister E. McGrath,
means that which is actually in God’s presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then, indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. Often, however, the name “church” designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ. By baptism we are initiated into faith in him; by partaking in the Lord’s Supper we attest our unity in true doctrine and love; in the Word of the Lord we have agreement, and for the preaching of the Word the ministry instituted by Christ is preserved. In this church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance. There are very many ambitious, greedy, envious persons, evil speakers, and some of quite unclean life. Such are tolerated for a time either because they cannot be convicted by a competent tribunal or because a vigorous discipline does not always flourish as it ought. Just as we must believe, therefore, that the former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, which is called “church” in respect to men.29

How is one to know the true church? Calvin goes onto to speak of the nature of the church: where the Word of God is purely preached and heard and where the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution (Inst. IV.1.9) When these traits are not found in the local church, it is incumbent upon the individual to help return the community to this norm: “every member of the church is charged with the responsibility of public edification according to the measure of his grace, provided he perform it decently and in order.”30

The key to understanding the power of the dialectic between the visible and invisible church is in the doctrine of election. Calvin writes:

29 Calvin, Institutes, IV.1.7.

30 Ibid., IV.1.12.
We must thus consider both God’s secret election and his inner call. For he alone “knows who are his” [II Tim.2:19], and, as Paul says, encloses them under his seal [Eph. 1:13], except that they bear his insignia by which they may be extinguished from the reprobate. But because a small and contemptible number are hidden in a huge multitude and a few grains of wheat are covered by a pile of chaff, we must leave to God alone the knowledge of his church, whose foundation is his secret election. It is not sufficient, indeed, for us to comprehend in mind and thought the multitude of the elect, unless we consider the unit of the church as that into which we are convinced we have been truly engrafted. For no hope of future inheritance remains to us unless we have been united with all of the members under Christ, our Head.  

Members of the church, the communion of saints, are those elected and chosen by God. This is a powerful message for those individuals who felt themselves to be a part of this group. It empowered people to reform existing churches, establish new congregations, travel to new lands to transform the world, and to endure oppression when necessary because God had chosen them to do so.  

The elect and the invisible church were intimately connected, but they could not be separated from the visible church and its imperfections. One way to discern the

31 Ibid., IV.1.2.


33 Though intertwined, election, invisibility, and visibility had to be carefully and prayerfully discerned. David N. Wiley writes: “Calvin believes that election is the foundation of the church for several reasons. As he reads scripture, the election of God is primary for the creation of God’s own people. This people has existed for the beginning (under various forms and even in a hidden condition). In addition, this church universal cannot be limited to any one institutional form in a still sinful world. Consequently, however much one might identify the visible church with its marks – the Word preached and heard and the
relationship between the elect and the church, or to know one’s own relationship to God and church, is to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is a strong feature in Calvin’s thought, and touches individuals, institutions, and all of creation. As individuals, the Holy Spirit is at work within us to unite us with God in order to reclaim our status as children of God. Without the Holy Spirit at work to move us into relationship, we could not obtain a transformed relationship with God. Within institutions, it is the work of the Spirit that will help us discern the nature of the church and its integrity. Only with the Spirit, and not through our human thinking or reasoning, can we discern the will of God and interpret God’s revelation in scripture. It is also the work of the Holy Spirit that inspires proclamation and the understanding of the sacraments. The Holy Spirit is not limited to the church, however, and is eternally at work in the world to restore and guide all of creation towards the knowledge and glory of God. Calvin is clear that without the work of the Holy Spirit in us, we would remain separated from God.

sacraments rightly administered – and with the elect, the true church is ultimately invisible, eternal, and invincible because of the sure foundation of divine election. It is distinct but not separate from the visible church. (Wiley, 96).


35 Calvin speaks of the Holy Spirit in each book of the Institutes, noting the variety of functions it serves: as a force behind revelation and our understanding and knowledge (Inst., I.13.14 & 15); in the
It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that the grace of God becomes known to us and is made available to us. Book Three of the *Institutes* is titled “The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ: What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow.” It opens with a section on “The Holy Spirit as the bond that united us to Christ,” describing the “energy of the Spirit by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits.”

The benefits of God’s grace include faith, a Christian life (piety), Christian freedom, prayer, and election. Among these benefits Reformed piety has become a major feature. Calvin tells us that piety is the “object of regeneration”: “The object of regeneration, as we have said, is to manifest in the life of believers a harmony and agreement between God’s righteousness and their obedience, and thus to confirm the adoption that they have received as sons.”

His most famous chapter on Christian piety is chapter seven, “The Sum of the Christian Life: The Denial of Ourselves.” This is not quite the negative proposition that it would seem. For Calvin, a believer’s life is not a world outside of the church (*Inst.* II.2.16); to bring us into the church (*Inst.* IV.1.4); to bring efficacy to the sacraments (*Inst.*, IV.14.18), etc.

36 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.1.

37 Ibid., III.6.1.

38 Calvin writes: “Now the great thing is this: we are consecrated and dedicated to god in order that we may thereafter think, speak, meditate, and do, nothing except to his glory. For a sacred thing may not be applied to profane used without marked injury to him. If we, then, are not our own [cf. I Cor. 6:19] but the Lord’s, it is clear what error we must flee, and whither we must direct all the acts of our life. We are not our own: let not our reason nor or will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward his as our only lawful
first step in earning salvation. It is, rather, a response of gratitude to God for gifts given. It is the ability to glorify God, to act humbly before the magnitude of God’s grace, and to embody the commandments and opportunities set before us through the Word of God. Like most of the early Reformed doctrines, piety has been viewed as both liberating and restrictive, as both gracious gift and judgmental bondage.

Though the definition and lived experience of Reformed piety has mutated over the centuries, it has always been a product of and a response to the Word of God. The Word of God is the fundamental, foundational authority for the Reformed Tradition and is what remains the criteria for all doctrinal and ecclesiological standards. Calvin writes:

Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips. Not only does he teach the elect to look upon a god, but also shows himself as the God upon whom they are to look. He has from the beginning maintained this plan for his church, so that besides these common proofs he also put forth his Word, which is more direct and more certain mark whereby he is to be recognized.  

He goes on to say: “the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard.”  

This is the beginning of his claim (shared by other reformers) that all authority resides in scripture, from God, and not from human reason or church

39 Ibid., I.6.1.

40 Ibid., I.7.1.
proclamation and tradition. Through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and the grace of God, it is for every believer in every generation to discern the Word of God. Thus, beginning in the early sixteenth century, the Reformed churches (as well as other Protestant groups) came to express their interpretation of the Word of God through confessions and catechisms. These were not only created for individual use, but were also the documents of communities representing their best attempt at knowing God and God’s will.\(^{41}\)

One of the basic tenets of the Reformed understanding of the Word of God is that God is sovereign and humanity is part of creation. God is to be glorified and humanity is to serve God humbly and without fail. Though God is sovereign, there is also the trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Calvin states that “unless God confronts us in Christ, we cannot come to know that we are saved” and “God is comprehended in Christ alone.”\(^{42}\) Christocentric to the core, Reformed theology upholds all three persons of the Trinity and the work of each, allowing for their unique contributions to election, salvation, and eternal life.

These themes can be traced through various strands of Reformed thought and structures, but they were rarely all emphasized simultaneously or consistently by Calvin or other Reformed theologians. Following the death of Calvin there were no other

\(^{41}\) For further discussion on the role of confessions in the Reformed tradition, see Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

\(^{42}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, II.6.4.
Reformed theologians who gained such prominence or notoriety as he did. Hence, even though Calvinism is a misnomer for the Reformed Tradition, his name is often associated with the Reformed Tradition. The reasons for this are many. Among them are:

- the production of a lucid and organized theological presentation in the *Institutes*, which included the idea of the “church under the cross,” or a persecuted minority that should nonetheless separate from the Roman church and form autonomous groups. This encouragement and support for dissenters gave them spiritual “permission” as well as comfort, and allowed for the spread of Reformed thought into every corner of Europe.\(^{43}\)

- the emphasis on education and the creation of academic structures. When Calvin called the church “the mother of believers” he was attributing to the church the motherly characteristics of nurture, guidance, and education: “For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.”\(^{44}\)

\(^{43}\) Benedict, 119-120.

\(^{44}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.1.4. Though this emphasis is most often interpreted as Calvin’s agreement with the traditional view that the church is an essential part of Christian life, it also serves as the foundation
his fluidity of thought and the ability of his theology to be highly portable, adaptable, and a strong resource to persecuted minorities. As communities developed they forged their own confessional statements to reflect the specifics of their time and place. Thus the Reformed Tradition included a variety of confessions and catechisms that shared the Reformed habit of mind but were unique to their situation. The shared ethos of the Reformed Tradition, rather than any one leader or document, was what held this variegated community together. The Reformed ethos, its *habitus*, was being represented by many nations in a variety of geographic areas, each bringing a sub-set of theological and ecclesiological standards originating in Reformed teachings and experience.

for an intense interest in educational endeavors. This was embodied in Geneva and throughout Reformed communities everywhere, as schools for children and adults were established. It was the Academy in Geneva (established in 1559), in fact, that contributed to the spread of the Reformed Tradition, for men from all nations came to Geneva to study and learn the ways of such a successful community. (Leith, 77-79).

45 Richard A. Muller “John Calvin and later Calvinism: the identity of the Reformed tradition,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, eds. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 134-135; see also Benedict, 281-291; Andrew Pettegree, “The spread of Calvin’s thought,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 207-224. This variety of confessions and communities was compounded by the flow of immigrants from Reformed geographical areas into the “new world” as exploration and colonization expanded. Compounded by civil and religious wars around Europe, entire communities of people were ready to seek asylum in America as a way to escape the fighting at home and to live in religious freedom. Historian Sydney Ahlstrom concluded that “Puritanism provided the moral and religious background of fully 75 percent of the people who declared their independence in 1776.” (Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 124; see also Leith, 44-50). But emigration was not limited to English Puritans: “In America, the Calvinism of the low-church Anglicans of Virginia, the Congregationalists of Massachusetts, the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians of North Carolina, and the Baptist of Rhode Island was reinforced by the Dutch Calvinism of New Jersey and New York and by the German Calvinism of Pennsylvania. Even John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, a notably anti-Calvin movement on the American frontier, once confessed that his theology came within a ‘hair’s-breadth of Calvinism’.” (Steinmetz, 113).
These factors are just a few of those that could be listed as reasons for the broad and rapid expansion of the Reformed Tradition. Because they are representative of a much wider movement, and because the limits of this dissertation do not allow for an elaboration of every point of Reformed thought, I will expand a bit further on the points already noted. For example, the *Institutes*, combined with the success of the Genevan experiment, were a powerful incentive to carry its content and form to other arenas where the reforming spirit was stirring. It is also speculated that Calvin wrote for communities—particularly in his native France—that were oppressed and persecuted. His formulations were sustainable in the face of oppression and his theology spoke loudly to those who wondered if God was indeed with them. The themes of the sovereignty of God, election, piety, and the nature of the church tied to the authority of scripture permitted an existence outside of approved political and social boundaries. The fact that Calvin did not advocate for a particular ecclesial structure is also a key to the breadth of Calvin’s influence. Though the Genevan experiment was successful, it was not required of the Reformed faithful. This permitted “Calvinism” to be highly portable and adaptable wherever it was introduced.

46 About the persecution and portability of Calvin’s teachings see Moltmann, 121; Benedict, 119; Wiley, 109; McGrath, 196.
And indeed, Calvinism was exported to both Eastern and Western Europe. Religious refugees and dissenters were a part of the religious landscape of sixteenth century Europe, and they brought with them a thirst for community and theological content. Geneva and other Swiss city-states were particularly amenable to religious seekers because they were not under the political constraints so many other emerging nations endured. Reformed Protestantism was erupting in Germany, Italy, and England during the late 16th century, but they were not welcome within the dominant political system and frequently immigrated to a Swiss location. In addition, most of the Reformed communities in Switzerland, including Berne, Zurich, Basel, and Geneva, founded an “Academy” for the education of scholars and pastors. Based on the value of knowledge of self and God (I.1.1) and the necessity of education in the life of faith, educational institutes were a vital part of the Reformed Tradition. The Academy established in Geneva, for example, produced many reformers for the next generation, including John Knox of Scotland, the English Puritan Thomas Cartwright, and Jacob Arminius who was Dutch. Men interested in learning more about Reformed thought, refugees displaced from their homes, and those who were wanting to learn how to proclaim the Word on

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47 For a sense of the geographic breadth of the Reformed Tradition, see Philip Benedict’s *Christ’s Church Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*; Leith, 37-44; Muller, 134-140.

their own to distant communities came to the Academy and went out again to disseminate what they learned even if it was into a hostile environment.

It is important, however, not to imagine an idyllic environment in which the Reformed Tradition—whether or not it is identified with Calvin’s name—grew and matured. There were numerous religious and civil wars during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century that forced religious groups to relocate or go underground. In many countries, such as France, enclaves existed secretly or were totally dependent upon the goodwill of the ruler. It was often difficult to distinguish between wars of religion and those of nationalism, but during this time most regions of Europe were undergoing significant turmoil on a variety of fronts.49

Each region had its own trajectory. Reformed theology was extremely popular in parts of Eastern Europe, but was essentially extinguished with the rise of the Roman Catholic Hapsburg Empire. In England the shift to Protestantism was by magisterial decree, but there were subsequent battles over what the nature of the faith would be: Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Reformed (in the form of Congregational dissenters, Separatists, Puritans, or Presbyterians via the Scottish style advocated by John Knox). In France the Protestants were eventually decimated and remained only as isolated communities with very little public presence of power.

49 Benedict offers the most readable, as well as the broadest, survey of the social situation of the times throughout Europe.
Part of this struggle was due to the inability of the people of the time to conceive of a multiplicity of churches. Because the Protestant reformers had not intended to constitute a new church, the possibility of having more than one church was impossible. Unity was a way of being; it was not a theoretical concept. As it became clear that more than one understanding of church would endure, the most common form of institution was by magisterial proclamation. The Reformed Tradition however, had always advocated for a separate but equal form of existence that gave legitimacy to political powers but made them distinct from ecclesiastical power and authority: “there is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men…the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter regulates only outward behavior.”  

This was of particular importance to Calvin’s understanding of freedom, and in fact falls in the chapter entitled “Christian Freedom.” In Book IV, chapter XX, Calvin lays out his plan for civil government and the relationship between the political and the spiritual. In the long term this permitted the Reformed Tradition to exist in nation states that were willing to tolerate it even if not fully embrace it. 

50 Calvin, Institutes, III.19.15. 

51 This did not always work of course: the Pilgrims are one example of a radical form of Reformed congregational Puritans that felt compelled to leave England and relocate to the Netherlands in order to survive faithfully. It also did not succeed in France, where the Huguenots were not supported by the rulers nor were they allowed to form an independent system outside of the Roman church. Often the most radical Protestants, typically Anabaptists, were those who were most persecuted.
As these groups of Protestants moved throughout Europe and into the New World, they carried with them the Reformed Tradition and established a new religious geography. The Reformed Tradition is by no means the only religious tradition to influence the evolution of the USA, but it had an early and decisive impact on the religious, political and social scene. Sydney E. Ahlstrom notes in the opening remarks of *A Religious History of the American People* that the confluence of religious turmoil on the European continent, the beginning of the age of discovery and colonization, and the persistence of both Roman Catholic and Protestant migrants, became important factors for the religious formation of the USA. He also notes that it was predominantly the Puritan Protestants, as well as other Reformed groups, that dominated this process. The English were the first to establish themselves in America, with the founding of Jamestown in 1607, the Pilgrims in Plymouth in 1620, and the Puritans in Boston in 1630. They brought with them a mixture of imperialism, nationalism, economic greed, and religious fervor. Dutch colonization was not far behind, settling Manhattan Island in 1624, and the English Quaker William Penn settled Pennsylvania in 1681. There were a variety of groups setting the Eastern seaboard, and most of them were Protestants who related to the Reformed Tradition, even if only marginally.

Educational institutions were one of the earliest hallmarks of the Reformed Tradition and they were quickly established in the New World. Because the Reformed

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52 Ahlstrom, 17.
Tradition was committed to knowledge of God and self, and a learned ministry was required to interpret and proclaim the Word of God, a college was founded in New England for the purposes of training ministers and maintaining the interpretation and integrity of the Word. The first classes were held at in 1638 an institution eventually named Harvard. For the transplanted Reformed communities, in all their variations, educated leaders were their key to discerning God’s will and their role in fulfilling it. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, produced in 1647, begins with the question: What is the chief end of man? And the answer is: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever. This echoes the themes presented by Calvin in the opening pages of the Institutes, when he lays out the intimate relationship of our knowledge of self and God, all to our advantage: “the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory,

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53 The speed with which such actions were taken, from vision to implementation, was directly related to the sense of religious urgency many of the migrants held. Though pastors were recruited from the European universities for many years to come, it was vital for the Reformed understanding of contextuality and doctrine to have pastors and teachers who were familiar with the local situation and could speak the meaning of the Word in the idiom of the New World: “Given the establishment of university discourse as the dominant pattern of pedagogy in Europe, it becomes clear that the rise of institutions of higher learning committed to the teaching of Reformed theology was of crucial important to the shape and development of Reformed thought. Driven by the need to train ministers at the highest level in order to facilitate the propagation of the faith and the combating of heresy, the reformed church inevitably both penetrated established seats of learning and founded a number of its own.” (Carl R. Trueman, “Calvin and Calvinism,” in The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 229).

in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him.” It also served to kindle a tenacious desire to work hard and seek results—a form of witnessing to the power and presence of God in one’s life. This desire to embody the glorification of God also derived, most likely, from the sense of freedom many migrants felt, having left an oppressive atmosphere for a society claiming religious freedom. Called by God to live faithfully and to God’s glory, migrants of the Reformed Tradition did everything possible glorify God and to transform the New World. The famous speech by John Winthrop before landing at the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 states this very clearly:

Now the only way…to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England." For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill.

55 Calvin, Institutes, I.2.1.

Part of the mandate to be a “city upon a hill” was to witness to the Word of God. This was explicit in the language of Calvin in his emphasis on both the proclaiming and the hearing of the Word of God as a feature of the church (Inst. 4.1.9). At times it was also considered to be a call to a lived faith, or piety. The emphasis and detail in Reformed documents attest to the importance of church discipline. Whichever direction this is taken, the sense that to be Reformed is to be evangelical was a part of the Reformed identity. Called to glorify God, to work hard to receive God’s blessing and the fruits of one’s labor, with the chance to transform society at the same time, was a winning combination and was shared in varying degrees by the Reformed communities that risked traveling to the New World.

And it was these characteristics, among others, that became a part of the fabric of the religious life of the USA, though not always explicitly or with conscious intent. And when the quality and passion of these characteristically Reformed claims diminished or began to disappear, revivals frequently emerged in their place. The first large-scale revival was the Great Awakening, 1740-43. Though Jonathan Edwards claims to have been surprised at a revivalist spirit in this church in 1734, the religious climate of New England has been described in this way: “Puritanism was itself, by expressed intention, a vast and extended revival movement. Few of its central spirits had ever wandered far from a primary concern for the heart’s inward response, and its laity inwardly knew that true religion could never be equated with dutiful observance. (Ahlstrom, 281) The Great Awakening was little different from other revival experiences, but it did stand out in part because of its location. Occurring primarily in New England, it brought a level of enthusiasm and emotion that is not generally associated with traditional Puritanism. Besides a heightened level of emotion—both in the preaching and in the bodily responses by those hearing—there was an increase in pious expressions of faith, including praying, devotional reading, and “individual exhorting.” (Ahlstrom, 286-7)

The Second Great Awakening began a generation later, enduring from 1797-1801, again in New England. There were also frontier revivals, the development of new denominations and the expansion of existing communities, and a rise in voluntary associations for moral and philanthropic work. Missionary
missionaries, and social reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed the ecclesial ambiance of the USA by introducing an accessible, “popular” theology, less attachment to discipline within the church community, an increased focus on personal piety, and a new emphasis on inner spiritual conversion and personal experience. The need to proclaim the Word and bring about salvation for everyone took on a new urgency. A new breed of pastors/preachers/revivalists emerged from established faith communities to urge everyone who would listen to seek salvation. Representative of the new generation of revivalists are Charles Finney, Dwight Moody, and Billy Sunday. These evangelists used whatever contemporary, popular means were available to them to save souls, including music, ambiance/venue, and print and other media. Finney in particular was associated with the “new measures” used in revivals. Perhaps most notably, his style and content was clearly “popular” rather than intellectual, cultured, or elitist. His language was tough and direct. He used publicity, he held meetings at

societies emerged during this time (the first formed in Connecticut in 1798), as did Bible societies (American Bible Society in 1816) and Sunday schools (1824 saw the establishment of the American Sunday School Union). (Ahlstrom, 416-427) There were also the beginnings of a temperance movement, and the seeds of the later Social Gospel movement could be seen in the work of Joseph Tuckerman in the Boston area as early as 1826. (Ahlstrom, 639).

58 Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) was an ordained Presbyterian minister, but he preached to anyone who would listen. He is also attributed with transforming revivalism with new techniques that included much more direct language, music, and publicity. He also violated a fundamental Reformed tenet by focusing on the “human production” of conversion rather than leaving salvation to the work of the Holy Spirit. (Ahlstrom 460) Dwight Moody (1837-99) was a Congregationalist who moved in similar directions as Finney, using a popular approach and bold presentation that drew in thousands of people. Billy Sunday (1863-1935) was a nominal Presbyterian, but spent most of his ministry outside of church walls. Building on the work and success of prior evangelists, Sunday continued the emphasis on popular appeal, using publicity, music, and a high level of drama and forceful language to bring listeners to repentance and salvation.
unconventional times, and he encouraged women to speak.\textsuperscript{59} Finney, as well as other evangelists, was unabashedly “enthusiastic” in style and concerned with a personal relationship to Jesus. This movement and others like it that emphasized personal and individual spirituality as well as religious experience, was not in itself a Reformed movement but arose in a particular social environment and was often communicated by representatives of traditional denominations. However, it was also viewed with alarm and skepticism by traditional Reformed clergy and academics that feared “an amalgam of folk religion and Americanism.”\textsuperscript{60}

Despite their best attempts, the mainline denominations became enculturated and newer churches gained power and popularity and the historical ties with the Reformed Tradition diminished as a featured characteristic in identity claims. The Reformed habit of mind was losing ground to Enlightenment thinking, popular religion, easy faith, and lax piety. Traditional Reformed thinking also had to combat Enlightenment sensibilities, the rise of natural science, and the skepticism towards biblical truths produced by the rise of historical textual criticism.\textsuperscript{61} The essence of the Reformed Tradition may have

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 460; an interesting side-note is how descriptions of Finney’s work as an evangelist fit into paradigms of church history that emphasize the use of media. In particular, Finney fits into the category of “Broadcast Culture,” which focuses on “event” rather than content, on experience rather than abstract principles, and upon immediacy rather than linear progression. See M. Rex Miller’s \textit{The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church} (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2004), chapter three.

\textsuperscript{60} Ahlstrom, 463.

\textsuperscript{61} Rohls, 265-266.
endured, and scholars and pastors may have carried the torch forward, but popular religion and piety generally lost sight of the roots of its attitudes, teachings, and actions.

Entwined with the geographic dispersion of the Reformed Tradition as narrated above was the ongoing development of Reformed theology. Different scholars offer different ways to understand the development of Reformed thought and its understanding of the nature of the church. Jan Rohls suggests a six phase development bracketed by Zwingli’s *Sixty-seven Articles* in 1523 and concluding with the *Helvetic Concordance Formula* of 1675. It is interesting to note that Calvin is considered but one voice among many in this schema rather than the starting place for an entire tradition as is so often assumed.

Rohls begins with Zwingli and the *Articles* as an early expression of Reformed thought (rather than being a variation of Lutheran thought) and concludes with the *Helvetic Concordance Formula* as a statement of high orthodox Reformed doctrine produced in defense of Enlightenment thinking. The six intermediate phases include:

1. The German speaking Swiss churches that were primarily influenced by Zwingli
2. The Genevan community, centered on Calvin and his successor Beza, which over time was linked with German speaking church of Zurich headed by Bullinger
3. The spread of Genevan Calvinism throughout Western and Eastern Europe
4. Calvinism and Philippism (a designation for the followers of Philipp Melanchton, a Lutheran theologian, and his mediating position that included a range of ideas, including Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed) combine to represent the German Reformed tradition
5. The Dordrect Synod which was formed in response to Arminianism and produced a “strict” Calvinism
6. Puritanism and its separation from Anglican church.\(^{62}\)

Richard A. Muller, on the other hand, offers a three phase consideration of Reformed thought that only begins with the closing years of Calvin’s life in the mid 1560’s. In the years following Calvin’s death a variety of interpretations of his thinking and teaching developed. The three phases of thought include early orthodoxy (1565-1620/40), high orthodoxy (1620/40-end of the seventeenth century), and late orthodoxy (end of the seventeenth century into the eighteenth century). The first phase begins roughly at the time of Calvin’s death (1565) and continues through the Synod of Dort in 1618-19. During this phase the creation of national and local confessional documents began in earnest, and the ongoing creation of localized confessions became a characteristic feature of the Reformed Tradition. Examples of the confessions during this period include *The French Confession* (1559), *The Scots Confession* (1560), *The Belgic Confession* (1561), *The Heidelberg Confession* (1563), *The Thirty-nine Articles* (1563), and *The Second Helvetic Confession* (1566). In terms of European geography, we have represented in these six confessions France, Scotland, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, England, Switzerland, and the many communities that adopted these confessions.

High orthodoxy covers the era of rapid expansion throughout Europe of the various Reformed communities and their attempts to formulate content and practice in

\(^{62}\) Rohls, 10.
viable forms. Confessions were formed for slightly different reasons in this phase, including attempts by distinct communities to articulate and codify their particular position and to protect their particular understanding of the Reformed Tradition, the need to have well crafted and systematic presentations of doctrine for the increasing polemical atmosphere among Protestants and between Protestants and Roman Catholics, and for the development of pedagogical tools to train and educate pastors. During this phase two of the most well known confessions were created, the *Westminster Confession* (1646) and *Catechism* (1649) and the *Savoy Declaration* (1658). *The Savoy Declaration* is a modification and response to the *Westminster Confession* created by those who preferred congregational polity over the Presbyterian system of the *Westminster Confession*.

This distinction between polities is characteristic of the third phase of late orthodoxy, which was a time of consolidation and stabilization of doctrinal matters even while communities were migrating to America and seeking to establish communities faithful to the Reformed vision. Denominationalism in the USA was one hallmark of this phase, as was the attempt to adapt existing confessions to a rapidly expanding and very fluid situation.\(^63\)

Clearly, each era is characterized by different features, and the features vary depending upon the location and social situation of each community. Despite

geographical distance, political considerations and doctrinal distinctions, the Reformed community consistently opted for a system of confessional and doctrinal development that privileged cooperation and collegiality over authoritarian decree. These confessions and articles of faith were the product of any number of synods, colloquies, disputations, and forums that brought, frequently, an international body of Reformed thinkers together to discuss and formulate the most faithful statements of faith possible for their time and place. Though rarely irenic, there were frequent exchanges and collaborations on confessions, catechisms, and declarations.

During these years however, the development of distinctively different threads of Reformed thought began to codify and stabilize, eventually leading to the variety of denominations we now identify as Reformed. Often the identity of the particular Reformed community was characterized as much by the form of its thought as by its content. One popular form of the time was scholasticism, which is a highly technical and academic method of approaching theology, in contrast to the methods of catechesis, exegesis, or homiletics. The Reformed Tradition adopted a scholastic approach to its theology in many locations in order to counter the arguments put forth by other religious groups. Scholasticism was also the language of the academy in many universities, and in order to be a viable and respected alternative to more traditional teachings, the Reformed

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64 Trueman, 225.
65 Muller, 140-141; Trueman, 228-229.
Tradition had to use scholastic style and categories. As the appeal to scripture lost its viability in disputations of both theological and academic natures, the Reformed Tradition developed metaphysical categories and a more systematic and coherent way of presenting itself.\textsuperscript{66} Another term often associated with Reformed thought is “orthodoxy,” which refers to content, and has always been the associated with the exposition of the “right” teaching. The need for orthodox statements of doctrine grew from the need to clarify the position of a particular community in distinction from other groups, and as a way to define itself. In some cases confessions became tests of faith rather than testimonies to faith, as in the time of the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675. For a time all clergy, though not the laity, had to subscribe to the confession.\textsuperscript{67}

Both of these categories are identified with Reformed thought. Richard Muller contends that the content of Reformed thought has changed very little from its inception, but the form has changed dramatically: “The differences between Reformed orthodox theology and the thought of any given Reformer moreover, are best accounted for, not in terms of methodological change, but in terms of the inherent varieties of formulation in the Reformed tradition, the cultural and geographical diversity of the movement itself, and the numerous thinkers involved who offered different nuances at all points in the

\textsuperscript{66} Trueman, 235-236.

\textsuperscript{67} See fn. 16 for additional information.
history of the Reformed churches."\textsuperscript{68} Neither label, orthodox or scholastic, fundamentally altered the basic definition of the nature of the church, though these labels did produce a variety of theological interpretations of the Reformed Tradition. Sometimes the variation in Reformed thought was due to the political situation, and at other times it was due to the theological background of the participants. It could also be attributed to the level of sophistication, urbanization, or radicalization of the local population. It often reflected the changing philosophical traditions and the development of Enlightenment thinking that introduced new ways of understanding reason, reality, and the life of faith.

What this variety of situations and contexts did do was permit a variety of polities to emerge, all of which could exist under the broad umbrella of the Reformed label. The three major forms of church government that emerged are presbyterian, congregational, and episcopal. They each have a distinctive core of values with a number of variations within each type. The least frequent polity to be found among the Reformed is that of the episcopate, though it does exist. This form of governance includes bishops who have authority over a group of churches (variously called dioceses, synods, judicatories, etc.). Reformed episcopacy does not imply that the bishop has unlimited authority within the individual congregations, and in some instances there is considerable freedom at the local

\textsuperscript{68} Muller, 140.
level. Titles and tasks vary among denominations, based on historical rights and privileges and local customs.

Congregationalism is one of the two major Reformed polities and is characterized by a “bottom-up” system that places primary authority in the local church. Local churches may unite into regional bodies, known by a variety of names: associations, synods, conferences, etc., but each local church is relatively autonomous. Congregationalism is frequently identified with the Puritan movement of the seventeenth century, and is still found in the United Church of Christ, one of the heirs of this early congregationalism. It is also found in denominations that do not traditionally identify themselves as Reformed, including Baptists, Anabaptists, Unitarian-Universalists, and some Jewish synagogues. In the instance of the United Church of Christ, this polity is expressed in a constitution and by-laws that provides a brief one-paragraph statement of beliefs, followed by a description of offices, structure, and various ministries.69

Presbyterian polity is perhaps the most readily identified with the Reformed Tradition, and is recognizable in Calvin’s Institutes and in the work of John Knox in Scotland. In the Presbyterian system each local church is governed by a body of elected officials, and groups of local churches are governed by a higher assembly often called a presbytery or classis; this regional grouping is brought together into synods, and synods

come together at the national level of general assembly (this language reflects the language currently used by the Presbyterian Church-USA). In many ways this system reflects a combination of the Episcopal and congregational polities, for authority travels in both directions: local churches have substantial room for self-governance, and they are the ones who elect presbytery, synod, and general assembly officers. The Presbyterian Church-USA encapsulates its polity in a Book of Order, which can be amended at the General Assembly each year. Unlike the Constitution and By-laws of the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church-USA Book of Order also includes an extensive theological statement on doctrine and ecclesiology, and includes a list of applicable historical confessions.  

As mentioned earlier, these various polities and the churches that implemented them adhered very closely to the original Reformed definition of church. For example, the Presbyterian Book of Order states: “The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the

Kingdom of Heaven to the world. The United Church of Christ includes a general statement of its faith and the nature of the church in its Preamble and in Article 5:

2. The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.

Article 5.10 Local Church: A Local Church is composed of persons who, believing in God as heavenly Father, and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness.

The confessions, platforms, declarations, and resolutions authored by Reformed theologians subsequent to the writing of the early sixteenth century reformers were the primary vehicle for clarifying ecclesial identity within a particular community. This has always been—and remains—a distinctive feature of the Reformed Tradition.

Confessional statements are produced, followed, revised or discarded as the Word of God is continually made known to the church. As can be seen in the two quotations above, these statements reflect the general ambiance and pluralistic non-specificity of the twentieth century American Reformed thought. This is not all bad, and may in fact be

71 Ibid. p.26, #2.

one of the features that has allowed the Reformed church to thrive in times of change. The Reformed Tradition has always upheld the necessity of critiquing and discerning the Word anew. Revelation has not ceased, and the Holy Spirit is still at work to reveal God’s will. An early expression of this is to be found in The Scots Confession, which embedded the necessity and value of ongoing critique and discernment of the word of God:

As we do not rashly condemn what good men, assembled together in general councils lawfully gathered, have set before us; so we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matter of great weight and importance. So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them...Not that we think any policy or order of ceremonies can be appointed for all ages, times, and places; for as ceremonies which men have devised are but temporal, so they may, and ought to be, changed, when they foster superstition rather than edify the Kirk.\(^73\)

In contrast, the Lutheran tradition did not foster the value of ongoing critique for the purposes of restating doctrinal positions, but rather maintained its allegiance to the Augsburg Confession and Book of Concord, and drew their identity from within these historical documents. The Reformed Tradition, however, continues to evolve (some would say fragment) as new situations and contexts encountered existing ecclesial identities, leading to new confessional statements on a regular basis.

Nonetheless, several important themes of the Reformed Tradition have remained consistent within Reformed churches into the present, though the centrality or dedication to a particular theme varied from community to community. This is evidenced by the range of churches included under the umbrella of “Reformed,” which is immense and variegated yet which continues to share the ethos and *habitus* of Reformed thought. The World Alliance of Reformed churches (WARC) claims 214 churches in 107 countries, including Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed and United churches. Churches that identify as Reformed in the USA include the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Hungarian Reformed Church in America, the Reformed Church in America, the Korean Presbyterian Church in America, the United Church of Christ, the Lithuanian Evangelical Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America.\(^74\)

This list does not include churches that are using a polity that may identify them as Methodist or Free church, for example, nor does it include denominations that may share many theological points but do not share the same sense of piety or commitment to Reformed doctrine, represented by the split between mainline and fundamentalist categories in some instances. Mainline churches, according to the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA), include the Presbyterian Church (US), the United

Methodist Church, The Reformed Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Half of this list identifies as Reformed. Comparing that small number to the number of Reformed churches listed by WARC and ARDA indicates that there are a number of factors that go into creating a Reformed identity, and that those factors may not all revolve around conceptions of doctrine and polity. In addition, some readings of Reformed history would include a far higher number of churches under the Reformed umbrella based on historic doctrine and polity. Thus, the Episcopal Church, Methodists, Baptists, and Quakers are sometimes included in discussions of Reformed influences, particularly in the USA.75

75 Steinmetz, 113; see also Ahlstrom, 132-33.
### Table 11. The Association of Religious Data Archives: forty denominations under the Reformed umbrella in the USA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denominational Name</th>
<th>Denominational Name</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German Reformed Church in the U.S.</td>
<td>Reformed Presbyterian Church in N. America, General Synod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Church of Christ</td>
<td>German Reformed Church in the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (General Synod)</td>
<td>Bible Presbyterian Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Church</td>
<td>Associate Presbyterian Church of N. America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churches of God, General Conference</td>
<td>Christian Reformed Church in N. America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregational Christian Churches</td>
<td>Churches of the Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Congregational Christian Conference</td>
<td>Congregationalist Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America</td>
<td>Cumberland Presbyterian Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Presbyterian Church</td>
<td>Evangelical and Reformed Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Synod of North America</td>
<td>Evangelical Presbyterian Church (1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Assembly of the Korean Presbyterian Church in America</td>
<td>Free Magyar Reformed Church in America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Council of Community Churches</td>
<td>Hungarian Reformed Church in America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association of Congregational Christian Churches</td>
<td>United Presbyterian Church of N. America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands Reformed Congregations</td>
<td>Ledeboerian Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)</td>
<td>National Council of Community Churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.</td>
<td>Reformed Church in the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protestant Reformed Churches in America</td>
<td>Orthodox Presbyterian Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reformed Presbyterian Church of N. America</td>
<td>Presbyterian Church in America</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reformed Presbyterian Synod</td>
<td>Presbyterian Church in the U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reformed Church in America</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod</td>
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<td></td>
<td>United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.</td>
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Whether or not the historical basis in Reformed thought is acknowledged, there are a number of shared characteristics among US Protestant denominations that can lead to the conclusion that Protestantism in the USA, and its contemporary religious and cultural milieu, is rooted in the Reformed Tradition. A variety of denominations share variations and combinations of the three primary Protestant forms for polity, all to be found in Reformed history: episcopacy, Presbyterianism, and congregationalism. The doctrinal points that are shared by this huge spectrum of communions are many, but the attention they receive (historically and contemporarily) and the degree of emphasis in a
particular communion is quite broad. However, the major doctrinal points shared by communions ranging from Quaker to Episcopalian which have a historical basis in the Reformed Tradition include:

- The Word of God as the sole source of authority, with a distant secondary role available for “human” traditions
- The Sovereignty of God
- The sinfulness of humanity (thus salvation is necessary; faith and grace alone)
- A belief in the trinity, with the emphasis on which person of the trinity shifting among communions and at different times
- Increased emphasis on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit
- The value of piety and Christian lifestyle
- The necessity of both an inner and outer conversion
- Importance of proclamation
- Validity and necessity of critique and discernment (through the working of the Holy Spirit
- Election and predestination
- The importance of proclamation, and therefore of evangelism
- Two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper (though the interpretation and role of the sacraments spans an immense spectrum of opinion)

Most people, if asked to identify qualities of Calvinism or the Reformed Tradition, would likely identify a theological issue such as predestination or the sovereignty of God, though the concept of Reformed faith being always seeking and open to change is perhaps a more representative characteristic in the twenty-first century.

_Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda_, the church reformed and always to be reformed, has become a recognizable and enduring motto for the Reformed Tradition. Attributed to Jodocus van Loedenstein in 1674, it reflects the commitment to the

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76 Though interestingly, Philip Benedict attributes it to a different 17th century Dutch churchman, Johannes Hoornbeeck; see Benedict, xvi.
ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the church. There is no absolute, permanent, understanding of the Word of God because revelation is ongoing and God’s relationship with humanity is without end.

Despite the ongoing transformation of religious traditions through cultural, political, philosophical, and scientific changes, Reformed teachings endured at various levels of consciousness and practice, ranging from high-orthodoxy and scholasticism to the populist appeal of revivals. At each level there has remained a community of believers, across traditions, concerned with the nature of the church and its work in the world and among believers. Having established the consistent stream of Reformed thought within the general milieu of American denominationalism, I’d like to move onto a more contemporary Reformed voice as a way means to explore the current state of Reformed thought. To this end I will consider Karl Barth, a Reformed theologian who has had a significant impact on Reformed ecclesiology.

Karl Barth’s ecclesiology evolved over the course of his writings, though it always reflected traditional Reformed foundations. He writes extensively of the church, and his work on the church is spread throughout his voluminous works, presented in dialogue with the particular theological principle upon which he is expounding. For example, in Church Dogmatics part of his discussion about the church is found in each of his major categories. In volume one, “The Doctrine of the Word of God”, the church is presented primarily as an aspect of God’s revelation (CD I/1/8-I/2/18) and as
proclamation of the Word (CD I/2/22-24). The volume “The Doctrine of God” presents the election of Jesus Christ in relationship to the election of both Israel and the church. “The Doctrine of Creation” sets the church within the context of creation as one of the “permanent objective reminders” of God’s rule (CDIII/3, p. 483). It is the fourth volume, “The Doctrine of Reconciliation,” that contains the most elaborate presentation of the church in relation to the Holy Spirit. In this volume there are chapters on *The Holy Spirit and the Gathering of the Christian Community, The Holy Spirit and the Upbuilding of the Christian Community, and The Holy Spirit and The Sending of the Christian Community.*

A particularly succinct definition of the church can found outside of the *Church Dogmatics* as well, in one of his shorter pieces, written in 1956: “‘We are the Church. The Church is the particular people, the congregation, or in Calvin’s term, the company, which through a bit of knowledge of the gracious God manifest in Jesus Christ is constituted, appointed, and called as His witness in the world.’” This definition touches upon several principles important to Barth’s ecclesiology as expressed in *Church Dogmatics*. For example, the church “particular”: local and concrete. It is not simply a spiritual entity formulated by faithful individuals; rather it is a group of witnessing

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77 Buckley, 201-204.

believers. It exists through God’s grace and for God’s glory as one part of God’s revelation, which is still unfolding and never totally grasped by the human mind.

Though compact, such a brief definition does not do justice to the complexity of Barth’s writings on the church. Another opportunity to understand his ecclesiology is in the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934). Written in response to German fascism and to address the conflation of church, power, and politics in Germany, Barth was the primary author of this confession which seeks to delineate the nature of the church in the world: “The Christian Church is the congregation of the brethren in which Jesus Christ acts presentely as the Lord in Word and sacrament through the Holy Spirit. As the Church of pardoned sinners, it has to testify in the midst of a sinful world, with its faith as with its obedience, with its message as with its order, that it is solely his property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction I in the expectation of his appearance.”

Once again, this small paragraph contains immense implications: the work of the Holy Spirit as a constitutive force of the church (and not human endeavor), the acknowledgement of human sinfulness and God’s sovereignty, and the idea that the church is not a form or tool of this world but a gift and sign of God’s grace in service to the Word until the eschaton.

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But as stated above, it is in the *Church Dogmatics* that the fullest description is to be found, and he immediately places it in the context of Christology:

The Christology is like a vertical line meeting a horizontal. The doctrine of the sin of man is the horizontal line as such. The doctrine of justification is the intersection of the horizontal line by the vertical. The remaining doctrine, that of the Church and of faith, is again the horizontal line, but this time seen as intersected by the vertical. The vertical line is the atoning work of God in Jesus Christ. The horizontal is the object of that work; man and humanity. We now come to the final aspect (within the event of reconciliation) of this whole encounter. The particular problem involved might be described as the subjective realisation of the atonement. The one reality of the atonement has both an objective and a subjective side in so far as we cannot separate but we must not confuse the two—it is both a divine act and offer and also an active human participation in it: the unique history of Jesus Christ...  

Barth goes on to say: “The history which we consider when we speak of the Christian community and Christian faith is enclosed and exemplified in the history of Jesus Christ.” In other words, Jesus Christ is the model for both the church and the individual Christian.

Kimlyn Bender notes that Barth considers the Holy Spirit at work in this process, and that it is not the spirit of the church at work, but rather “the Spirit of the God who acts in Jesus Christ.” Because the Spirit and God cannot be controlled by any force,

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81 Ibid., 644.

82 Bender, 163.

83 Barth, *CD IV/1/62*, 647.
and because human sinfulness precludes humanity from knowing God’s full self-revelation, the Spirit must be both the foundation of the church and the force for constant renewal and reinterpretation:

In everything that we have to say concerning the Christian community and Christian faith we can move only within the circle that they are founded by the Holy Spirit and therefore that they must be continually refounded by Him, but that the necessary refounding by the Holy Spirit can consist only in a renewal of the founding which He has already accomplished. To put it in another way, the receiving of the Holy Spirit which makes the community a Christian community and a man a Christian will work itself out and show itself in the fact that only now will they really expect Him, only now will they want to receive Him; and where He is really expected, where there is a desire to receive Him, that is the work which He has already begun, the infallible sign of His presence.  

This paradoxical situation, reflective of Barth’s dialectical theology, speaks to his understanding of the church both as an event and as an institution. Bender notes how difficult holding the two sides together, one side being the need for constant renewal and the other side declaring that receiving the Spirit is the sign of the Spirit’s ongoing activity. Since the church is the work of the Holy Spirit, yet is historically existent, we have the dialectical tension of the church as both the object of faith and a form of human activity:

As the work of the Holy Spirit…the Church is a work which takes place among men in the form of a human activity. Therefore it not only has a history, but-like man (CD III, 2 § 44)-it exists only as a definite history takes place, that is to say, only as it is gathered and lets itself be gathered and gathers itself by the living Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. To describe its being we must abandon the

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84 Ibid., 647.
85 Bender, 165.
usual distinctions between being and act, status and dynamic, essence and existence. Its act is its being, its status its dynamic, its essence its existence. The Church is when it takes place…

Since the church, for Barth, is dynamic, the role of traditions and historic forms of ecclesiology are diminished and replaced with faith in God’s sovereignty, grace, and revelation in His son, Jesus Christ. The church, and its people, is freed to allow God’s grace to work in the world:

[I believe in the church] then means that the Church can take itself seriously in the world of the earthly and visible, with all humility but also with all comfort, at once directed and established by its third dimension. According to its best knowledge and conscience, it can and should create the forms which are indispensable to it as the human society which it essentially is, the forms which are best adapted to its edification and the discharge of its mission. It can and should think and discuss and decide with the necessary prudence and boldness concerning such things as canon, dogma, constitution, order and cultus. In its great hours it has always rightly done this and will continue to do so. It must do it in faith and obedience. It has to remember that it is not itself God but is responsible to God, that it does not have the last word. But with this reservation in relation to itself, with a consciousness of the relativity of its decisions, their provisional nature, their need of constant reform, standing under and not over the Word it can go to work with quiet determination, accepting the risk, but with the courage and authority of faith and obedience, and therefore without the false affectation which in order not to do anything questionable will never do anything at all, which in every conditional assertion scents an attempt at the unconditional, which out of a simple fear of hardening, orthodoxy, authoritarianism and hierarchy can never get past the stage of questioning and protesting (as though in the last resort formlessness and therefore chaos is the condition which is best pleasing to God).

86 Barth, CD IV/1/62, 651 (emphasis added).

87 Ibid., 660.
Each of these examples offers a glimpse of Barth’s ecclesiology and cannot do justice to the entirety of his ecclesiology. But it does indicate the thoroughly Reformed approach that Barth takes in the themes he works with: God’s sovereignty, the saving work of Jesus Christ, the essential role of the Holy Spirit, and the need for humility in the face of our fallen nature and limited knowledge of God. As he crafted his ecclesiology, much of his work was seen to be in opposition to church attitudes and choices, because he found them to be at odds with God’s revelation in Jesus Christ through scripture and far too bound to social and cultural norms. In this sense he was a proponent of returning to the Word of God as well as to the writings of the early Church Fathers. He was opposed to the personal and individual spirituality and sentimentalism that he felt to be tied in with liberal theology (via Schleiermacher or Jonathan Edwards, for example) and the focus on anthropology before the sovereignty of God. He was opposed to the triumphalism of the liberal church in the twentieth century and its inability (or unwillingness) to distinguish between power and political hegemony and the Word of God. 88

By taking such an oppositional stance, Barth was, in a sense, calling the Reformed Tradition back to its original principles and faithfulness. Unfortunately, because he was a strong critic of the church, his voice was often set aside. Nonetheless, Barth’s approach

to expressing the Reformed thought in the twentieth century brings attention to the many ways in which Reformed ecclesiology has moved away from its origins and early values. Recalling Brian Gerrish’s definition of a “Reformed habit of mind,” which includes the qualities of deference, critical conversation, openness, practicality, and the Word of God, we can still see aspects of these qualities at work in contemporary Reformed ecclesiologies, but they are not consistently or evenly applied within Reformed communities. There is vast gap, in some Reformed communities, between the official theological pronouncements and proceedings of the denominational administrative hierarchy and the lived experience of individual congregants. Thus, I would like to suggest that four essential points of Reformed thought which cross over all of Gerrish’s categories, that have either been seriously diminished or disregarded by Reformed thought as a lived experience has evolved in the US. These are the power and place of the Holy Spirit in ecclesiology, the persistent force of enculturation and privilege on ecclesiological expression, the loss of humility and the accentuation of human endeavors, and the decline of piety as a component of faithful ecclesiology.

The primacy of place for the Holy Spirit in Reformed ecclesiologies is indisputable, though it has receded as a primary element in the lived religion of mainline Reformed traditions. The role of the Holy Spirit was a formidable aspect of early Reformed thought. Reading through confessions randomly, or reading the works of Calvin or Barth, in either case the Holy Spirit is front and center as a dynamic and vital force for bringing discernment, understanding and revitalization to Reformed
communities. Returning to Calvin we hear again: “The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit…must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us.”

The *Scots Confession* of 1560 states:

This our faith and its assurance do not proceed from flesh and blood, that is to say, from natural powers within us, but are the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; whom we confess to be God, equal with the Father and with his Son, who sanctifies us, and brings us into all truth by his own working, without whom we should remain forever enemies to God and ignorant of his Son, Christ Jesus. For by nature we are so dead, so blind, and so perverse, that neither can we feel when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus quicken that which is dead, remove the darkness from our minds, and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of his blessed will.

The place and power of the Holy Spirit was essential for remaining connected and faithful to God. But I would suggest that the role of the Holy Spirit decreased in Reformed thought and teachings in proportion to its popularity within American culture and “low-church,” populist faith communities. In an attempt to differentiate itself from popular religion and what it considered to be excessive “enthusiasm,” mainline Reformed communities allowed the place of the Holy Spirit to recede into an acknowledged but rarely articulated presence in the community. The setting of such boundaries was not

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89 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.7.4.

90 Cochrane, 173.

91 I would situate this shift in the wake of the First Great Awakening, sometime after 1738, rather than be the result of increased immigration of Anabaptists, Pietists, or Spiritualists.
new, of course, to the US context. Early battles with pietism, spiritualism, and the Anabaptists produced a number of confessions seeking to reduce the excesses of these radical groups, including the First Helvetic Confession (1536), the Belgic Confession (1562), and the Thirty-nine Articles (1563). As mentioned earlier, many of the confessions and declarations produced by Reformed communities in the early centuries were a means of codifying theological positions and protecting itself from what was perceived as heresy and misguided understandings. These early confessions were also a way to demarcate the boundaries of a particular community, as reflected in Rohls’ delineation of confessional production into geographical and national groups.92

As many Reformed communities turned away from the Holy Spirit because of its association with excess, the emphasis shifted onto another important theme within Reformed thought: the Word of God. However, as important as the Word was, it was the fact that it was an intellectual endeavor, one of reason and rationality, contained and linear, which helped it move into the forefront of Reformed emphasis. Intellectual pursuit of the Word was much less messy than the unpredictable signs of the Spirit, which could move people to burst into glossolalia or fall on the floor in ecstasy. Unfortunately, the combined forces of the privileging of experience over reason, the increasing individualism and focus on personal piety rather than corporate piety, and the social context which was generating class and educational differences at a quick pace,

92Rohls, 9-28.
worked together to divide Reformed thought into, among other things, a high and low form. The high church, currently identified with the mainline denominations, emphasized the mind, learning, and hearing the Word and was associated with established ethnic groups and the intellectual elite. The low church (or popular expressions of faith) focused more on spiritual experiences and personal salvation and was identified with the westward movement of people and the unestablished or disestablished. Interestingly, both groups continued to refer to the same historical documents as the basis for their beliefs. It was just that different communities opted to emphasize different themes.

A reclamation of the Holy Spirit, and a balanced consideration of its role in discerning God’s ongoing self-revelation is an important task for the Reformed community. The implication of a church founded upon the work of the Spirit and guided by it is to move the focus away from an anthropological emphasis on institutional life and organization, allowing for spontaneity, change, and the unexpected. It also communicates the ongoing presence of God in the church, as well as the continuity of purpose for the church as a gathering of people committed in faith to Christ and the Kingdom of God.

The second aspect of the Reformed *habitus* that needs addressing is the persistent force of enculturation and privilege on ecclesiological expression. The Reformed Tradition, so much a part of the fabric of the US, has become the cultural norm in an implicit, barely discernable way (based on Gerrish’s characteristics). Yet in the process
of normatization, the Reformed *habitus* was domesticated and stripped of its edginess. Once there was no need to transform society (in the sense of the Pilgrim’s mandate, noted earlier), Reformed churches began to look inward rather than outward. Privilege and hegemony dissipated the vitality of a faith called to witness to the glory of God, and the void was filled with a building-up of personal faith and the perceived fruits of faithfulness, for example wealth and commodities. Doctrines continued to be codified to demarcate one group from another without lending content or substance to the lived faith of followers, which in turn allowed the cultural norms of scientific thinking, literary criticism, and the power of reason to become dominant.

Calvin and other early Reformers were not opposed to the use of sources outside of the Christian tradition, as long as the authority of the Word was not compromised. Calvin had, after all, been trained as a humanist and a lawyer and continued to rely upon extra-Christian studies in his exegesis, preaching, and writing. But one thing Calvin and the magisterial reformers did do was to write to a people who faced persecution and oppression. They wrote with a passion and an urgency that is not typical of an enculturated church. The sovereignty of God, election, predestination, the power of the Holy Spirit, as well as many other doctrines were fundamental pieces of a faith for a people seeking understanding of God’s will for them and how to live faithfully. God, as known through scripture, was their source of strength and ground of their being. The current situation in the US rarely generates that sense of dependence in Reformed communities, in part because these core doctrines have been replaced by human tradition,
comfort, and individualism. This, to use Gerrish’s term, has led to a loss of dynamism and a decreased focus on the Word of God as our source of authority.

This move away from the Reformed *habitus* has led directly to my third point, which is the loss of humility in doctrinal and ecclesial expression. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) opens with the question: “What is your only comfort, in life and in death?” which is answered with “That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” Unfortunately, we have moved away from this relationship to God to one that is far more anthropologically centered and willing to place human endeavor as its greatest hope and not the will of God. This is not, of course, a doctrine. It is rather a slippage into the human sin of pride which displaces God from our center. The early Reformed thinkers were cognizant of this tendency, and for that reason included in many confessions the caveat that we may not have all the answers: God is still speaking and the final authority. The *Scots Confession* (1560) states this clearly at the end of Chapter XVIII:

> When controversy arises about the right understanding of any passage or sentence of Scripture, or for the reformation of any abuse within the Kirk of God, we ought not so much to ask what men have said or done before us, as what the Holy Ghost uniformly speaks within the body of the Scriptures and what Christ Jesus Himself

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93 Cochrane, 305.

94 *Book of Confessions*, 7.001.
did and commanded. For it is agreed by all that the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of unity, cannot contradict Himself. So if the interpretation or opinion of any theologian, Kirk, or council, is contrary to the plain Word of God written in any other passage of the Scripture, it is most certain that this is not the true understanding and meaning of the Holy Ghost, although councils, realms, and nations have approved and received it. We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or to the rule of love.\textsuperscript{95}

The following chapter goes on to say “Not that we think any policy or order of ceremonies can be appointed for all ages, time, and places; for as ceremonies which men have devised are but temporal, so they may, and ought to be, changed, when they foster superstition rather than edify the Kirk.”\textsuperscript{96} In both cases the point is that human endeavor and understanding must be tempered by the acknowledgment of an authority greater than itself.

Nonetheless, in many places tradition has been privileged over doctrine, and doctrine has been replaced by contemporary cultural theories that are not based on the Word of God. In the past this situation has been addressed by the production of new confessional statements or declarations. Again, this is not a new situation for the Reformed Tradition: the \textit{Helvetic Concensus Formula} (1675) was created for the precise purpose of establishing particular doctrine and tradition as equally authoritative as scripture,\textsuperscript{97} and has led many people to identify Reformed thought as rigid and

\textsuperscript{95} Cochrane, 177.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 179.

\textsuperscript{97} See footnote #16.
unyielding. There may be signs of this shifting back to a more traditional Reformed
habitus with the application of postmodern ideals. Postmodernism has released the grip
of the Enlightenment principles of absolutism and universalism and thereby allowed
again the prospect for reflection and consideration of new ways of thinking and doing.
Once again it may be permissible to acknowledge the possibility that we might not be
aware, or able to grasp, all there is to know. Postmodern thinking once again allows for
the shades of grey that make up much of the human condition and social fabric.

Both Calvin and Barth were able to allow for this flexibility and
incomprehensibility of God’s revelation once and for all, though of course it was not
labeled postmodern. Calvin relied on the idea of accommodation, the idea that God
would reveal what was possible to limited human perception in a way that we could
understand: “God’s constancy shines forth in the fact that he taught the same doctrine to
cal all ages, and has continued to require the same worship of his name that he enjoined from
the beginning. In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, he does not
show himself subject to change. Rather, he has accommodated himself to men’s
capacity, which is varied and changeable.”

Calvin also acknowledged the Holy Spirit
as unpredictable and unexpected source of revelation and discernment, as mentioned
previously. Calvin was also more than willing to site human fallibility and sinfulness as
reasons why we must remain humble before God, a proposition that is generally out of

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98 Calvin, Institutes, II.11.13.
favor today. Barth’s contribution to this reclamation of humility also relies upon the power and place of the Holy Spirit, but it also entails his use of dialecticism and paradox. Barth speaks of it through his “yes/no” dichotomy, that we must both embrace and critique ourselves and our world and our God while balancing the gift of grace and human sinfulness. Another way to describe paradox and dialectics is “mystery,” and acknowledgement that there are things that are not comfortable because they are not rational, graspable, controllable. Mystery leaves to much in God’s hands, and not enough in ours. Yet we need to return to a permanent stance of humility, discernment, and openness, which Gerrish has identified as one of chief characteristics of the reformed habitus.

Finally, the fourth point is the decline of pietas as a component of faithful ecclesiology. Piety for Calvin is the acknowledgment that we are God’s and not our own, and that our lives are to be lived to the glory of God. This is not a personal experience, but a relational one, both with God and with other creatures, and within the ecclesial community. Calvin refers to it as some points as “service” which will reach out to others but will also transform the believer: “Let this therefore be the first step, that a man depart from himself in order that he may apply the whole force of his ability in the service of the Lord. I call “service” not only what lies in obedience to God’s Word but what turns the mind of man, empty of its own carnal sense, wholly to the bidding of God’s Spirit….Christian philosophy bids reason give way to, submit and subject itself to, the
Holy Spirit so that the man himself may no longer live but hear Christ living and reigning within him [Gal. 2:20].”

Piety is not simply, as it is sometimes thought to be, a set of rules or requirements regulating one’s life. It may be that, but such an image tends to be pejorative and focus on the restrictions attributed to piety. For Calvin and for many other Reformers, piety was a gracious gift of God which allows us respond to God’s graciousness and to glorify God. It is the gift of a way of life that draws us deeper into relationship with God while reflecting this relationship outward into the community and the world. Without piety, the relationship with God is unfulfilled. It is this emphasis on praxis that makes Calvin such a practical theologian. He was seeking to form a Christian way of life.

The role of piety, however, has diminished over time, battered by Enlightenment (and Reformed!) ideals of freedom, election, and toleration as well as by the presence of so many other religious and secular lifestyles and behaviors to choose from. With the shift to Enlightenment thinking, coupled with pietism and the emphasis on personal religious experience, the movement towards individual freedom and toleration of differences, the move away from a strict piety was inevitable. While some denominations have made concerted efforts to protect their boundaries by instituting rules and regulations for both behavior and belief, other groups let go of most forms of piety as

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99 Ibid., III.7.1.

100 Rohls, 272-284.
an individual choice, extraneous, or hypocritical. This tendency has been reversing itself of late with a growing emphasis on praxis within church communities. Nicholas Healy warns against an ungrounded use of practices as being more oriented toward human need and traditional formulations than being intended for the glorification of God. Sounding very Barthian in his emphasis on the Holy Spirit, Healy writes:

We ordinary Christians need a theological account of ‘what difference it makes’ that the church and some of its practices are sometimes really ‘unattractive’ and a condition of the possibility for not living well. Faced with the confused and sinful practices and intentions and construals of our congregations, we need to know how the Holy Spirit, rather than being ‘bound’ to the church and its practices, can overcome the effects of the churches upon their membership, and the membership upon their churches, so that in spite of the church as well as by its help we may be sanctified and brought closer to Christ.¹⁰¹

The need for faithful practices—call it piety or spirituality or something else—can be agreed upon by many people, but for it to fit into the Reformed habitus it must honor the relationship between Creator and creature and meet the goal of glorifying God in all things.

However these features might be reclaimed for Reformed ecclesiology, the fundamental principle of knowing God and self through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in hearts, minds, and lives remains essential to the particular contextual expressions of doctrine. Moltmann expresses this well: “Reformed theology is, as its name testifies, nothing other than reformatory theology (reformatorische Theologie), theology of

permanent reformation…Reformatory theology is theology in the service of reformation; reformation is its historical principle.”

Reformed ecclesiology is best characterized by its dynamism and contextuality, and it unabashedly seeks to maintain this dynamism. Though tied to particular time and place in its expression, it is not accountable to historical continuity and accountability in the same way that many established churches and traditions are. Its purpose is grounded in revelation, salvation, and the eschaton, not in linear time. As time accumulates, the number and breadth of doctrinal and structural expressions of Reformed thinking are more plentiful, perhaps, than they were in the sixteenth century, but they are not unique to the twenty-first century. The ecumenical and collaborative spirit of Reformed thought is a strong force in ecumenical dialogues and efforts of unification today, a spirit that was in practice from the earliest gatherings of European reformers for the purpose of debate, critique, discernment, and codification of the power and presence of the Word of God at work in the world. Doctrinal particularities and variegated polities have always existed along a wide spectrum, so wide that sometimes it has seemed as if more than one spectrum was in operation. But the Reformed Tradition has always allowed for this variety as long as their basic Christian beliefs are upheld. These beliefs have remained amazingly consistent over the centuries: the Word of God as the source of all authority, the sovereignty of God, divine election, Jesus Christ as the our savior, the power and

102 Moltmann, 120.
presence of the Holy Spirit, the value—and necessity—of piety and discipline, two sacraments, the importance of proclamation of the Word, and the church as a means of God’s grace. How each particular Reformed community interprets these characteristics is innumerable. How strictly these concepts are followed varies widely. How much they are talked about consciously is questionable in many places. Yet they are implicit norms that shape and form the practices and values of communities in relationship to the world.

With this in mind, a “theology of permanent reformation” is the characteristic of Reformed ecclesiology that can be lifted up and celebrated as a factor that unites and can continue uniting churches in our context. In the next chapter, I move to articulate four Reformed theological themes that dominate any consideration of a cyber-ecclesiology: authority, community, embodiment, and mediation. Always a source of contention within the Reformed Tradition, and consistently arrayed along a broad spectrum of definition and practice, these four categories speak to a number of issues found in all ecclesioologies, and they will be particularly important for any cyber-church to consider.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE INTERSECTION OF ECCLESIOLOGY AND THE
ONLINE CHURCH: FOUR ISSUES

“Reformed theology is, as its name testifies, nothing other than *reformatory theology* (reformatorische Theologie), theology of permanent reformation… Reformatory theology is theology in the service of reformation; reformation is its historical principle.”

Cyber-religion provokes any number of issues within theology and ecclesiology, though they are not all unique to the topic of cyber-religion. Four recurring and vitally important themes are authority, community, mediation, and embodiment. Each of these themes is thoroughly embedded in the *habitus* of the Reformed Tradition, as well as intimately a part of the human-computer relationship. Many of the questions associated with cyber-religion harken back to major themes of the early magisterial Reformation, as was noted in the previous chapter. In the world of human-computer interaction, these themes elicit both concerns and opportunities for new relationships and experiences, just as the introduction of new media occasioned change and innovation, for example, with the development of the printing press and mass media in the sixteenth century. My intention is to consider the four themes noted above—authority, community, mediation, and embodiment—that repeatedly emerge within any dialogue between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and ecclesiology.

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1 Jürgen Moltmann, “*Theologia Reformata et Semper Reformanda,*” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics Traditions,* eds. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 120.
The ecclesiologies emerging from the Reformed Tradition offer fertile ground for these observations. Reformed ecclesiology, in its various forms of expression, is best characterized by its dynamism and contextuality, as well as its unabashed desire to maintain its dynamism. Having a “theology of permanent reformation” is the characteristic of Reformed ecclesiology that, while formal rather than material, can be lifted up and celebrated as a factor that can unite diverse communities, contexts, theologies, and technologies. Always a source of contention within the Reformed Tradition, and consistently arrayed along a broad spectrum of definition and practice, the four themes noted above speak to a number of issues found in all ecclesiologies, and they will be particularly important for any cyber-church to consider. These topics are also found within cyber-communities independent of any theological considerations. Thus, creating a conversation between these two disciplines—ecclesiology and CMC—may offer a deeper analysis of how these two arenas can, or cannot, work together.

Authority

The source of authority in the Reformed Tradition falls squarely on God’s Word as found in Scripture, as it did in all the branches of the magisterial Reformation. If it was not in the Bible it was not revelation. The ecclesial traditions and theological positions honored throughout the centuries did not disappear from Reformed thought or consideration, but they were not given the same credence as scripture. John Calvin and others differed in their interpretations of this matter in a number of ways, including considerations of which books of the Bible were most authoritative, which books should
be included in the canon, how the Bible was to be interpreted, and who could do the interpreting. Calvin, for example, was inclined to make the tangible Word (the Bible) accessible to “all peoples, times and classes,” as he wrote in his Latin preface to Olivétan’s 1535 French Bible.² Or as he said in one of his French prefaces in this same Bible edition: “We are called to this inheritance without respect for persons; male or female, little or great, servant or lord, master or disciple, cleric or lay, Hebrew or Greek, French or Latin—no one is rejected, who with sure confidence receives him who was sent for him, embraces what is presented to him, and in short acknowledges Jesus Christ for what he is and as he is given by the Father.”³

This is a clear combination of the Reformation’s evangelical drive to share the Gospel and the Reformed concern to make it accessible to everyone. All of the reformers hoped to provide believers with a pure, authentic encounter with revelation as found in the Scripture. They did not feel that it needed to be mediated through nature or through a designated religious leader. However, whereas the Lutheran tradition emphasized the preached word and left the major work of interpretation in the hands of the clergy,⁴

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Calvin and the Reformed tradition—while putting a large emphasis on preaching—would develop teaching and study as paths to Truth and authentic revelation.

Among all of the reforming movements, however, it was normative to emphasize the Word of God, in both its physical form as the Bible and as God’s revelation. The sovereignty of God known through the Word was at the core of the Reformed sense of authority, and God is known only in the ways that God chooses. Revelation does occur in creation, but it is the church, the sacraments, preaching and hearing the Word that are the primary means of grace and the God-given aids to knowledge of God. Nonetheless, due to the human inability to discern and understand revelation, Calvin also spoke of God’s accommodation to human inadequacies: “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.”

The entire fourth book of the Institutes is devoted to the means of grace, which are both sustaining features of the church as well as the way to express God’s revelation.

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7 Ibid., IV.1.9 “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.” He also writes: “...although God’s power is not bound to outward means, he has nonetheless bound us to this ordinary manner of teaching.” IV.1.5.

8 Ibid., I.13.1; see also I.17.13, II.11.13, IV.1.8.
It is in and through the church that God will be most fully known. Calvin echoes the words of the early church father Cyprian when he says: “For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder’ [Mark 10:9p.], so that, for those to whom he is Father the church may also be Mother.” He also follows in Augustine’s footsteps in making the church both a visible and invisible entity, and an authority to be reckoned with on either level. The invisible church is the community of saints, which resides in God’s presence, and visible church—which may include the saints—also includes those who are Christians in name only. The two are joined, but are not identical. Because of this distinction, Calvin writes: “Just as we must believe…that the former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, which is called “church” in respect to men.” The church is important because it is the community responsible for both interpreting and embodying the Word of God, the ultimate source of God’s self-revelation. Calvin’s “marks of the church” reflect his understanding that the marks are given as ways to know God.

While Calvin is insistent in his position on the church as a vital source of authority, he is also willing to note God’s propensity to accommodate revelation to human limitations, as noted above. It is through his understanding of accommodation that Calvin can accept the inconsistency and variability of God’s revelation, which has, of

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9 Ibid., IV.1.1.

10 Ibid., IV.1.7.
course, allowed for a wide variety of forms and interpretation within the Reformed Tradition:

because some people hold up to ridicule this variableness in governing the church, this diverse manner of teaching, these great changes of rites and ceremonies, we must also answer them before we pass on to other matters...It is not fitting, they say, that God, always self-consistent, should permit such a great change, disapproving afterward what he had once commanded and commended. I reply that God ought not to be considered changeable merely because he accommodated diverse forms to different ages, as he knew would be expedient for each...Why, then, do we brand God with the mark of inconstancy because he has with apt and fitting marks distinguished a diversity of times?...God’s constancy shines forth in the fact that he taught the same doctrine to all ages, and has continued to require the same worship of his name that he enjoined from the beginning. In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, he does not show himself subject to change. Rather, he has accommodated himself to men’s capacity, which is varied and changeable.11

Even while God works with human frailty, there is a correlative doctrine that supports and reinforces the accommodations God has made. This is the doctrine of *adiaphora*, or non-essential things. This doctrine is not new with Calvin, but it does play a role in his theology. It was, for Calvin, a way to distinguish between the Word of God and the human traditions and interpretations which had accumulated over time. He uses it to express his understanding of human freedom in relationship to God, as well as to indicate the need for discernment in understanding the various means of grace and Scriptural interpretations: “The third part of Christian freedom lies in this: regarding outward things that are of themselves indifferent, we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using

11Ibid., II.11.13.
them, indifferently. And the knowledge of this freedom is very necessary for us, for if it is lacking, our consciences will have no repose and there will be no end to superstitions."12 When writing about the means of grace, and specifically the church, he writes:

not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestionable by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith….First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to sum of religion and without loss of salvation.13

Doctrinal unity takes precedence over form, and those doctrines based on the Word of God are the most essential. Thus, in considering the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, they are essential because they are based on scriptural accounts. The other five sacraments recognized by the Roman church are not considered scriptural in the view of the Magisterial Reformers and are therefore non-essential.14 By elaborating and articulating these doctrines for the Reformed Tradition, Calvin and subsequent Reformed theologians were able to keep in place a sense of ultimate authority that was often accommodated to human need but was still to be grounded in the Word.

12 Ibid., III.19.7.
13 Ibid., IV.1.12.
14 Ibid., IV.14.18-20.
Similarly, the confessions play a role in bounding authority in a definitive, but nonetheless fluid manner. Confessions were the doctrinal statements of a particular time, place, and people, and were expressive of the current understanding of God’s word for that situation. However, they were not accorded the same value as scripture and were not elevated to that level of authority. There were times in history where confessions were used as tests of faith, or became inordinately powerful with a branch of the Reformed tradition, but they were more generally seen as guides and aides to understanding the Word.

Calvin clearly wanted to hold God’s sovereignty intact while allowing human fluidity and limited knowledge to function. He maintained the authority of God as found in Scripture and doctrinal understandings while permitting the non-essentials of material expression to be more vague and contextual. This is one reason for the diversity of expression within the Reformed Tradition and its offshoots. It is also what may make it possible that a new form of expression—such as an online community—could be conceivable, workable, and valid as a legitimate form of church in the Reformed tradition. As indicated in the previous chapter, the proliferation of localized confessional statements was one answer to defining the relationship of form and doctrine, and they were not considered to be immutable or permanent statements of faith. Each generation, in its given time and place, is required to discern the movement of the Spirit and the level of accommodation God is allowing in the interpretation of revelation. While this is the ideal process, there have been difficulties with this within the Reformed Tradition.
Unlike Lutheranism which has remained relatively intact, the Reformed Tradition has fragmented into innumerable communities. In addition, there has always been a problem in balancing the tension between individual freedom of action and interpretation with the need to maintain a purity of doctrine grounded in the Word.

These historic issues and tensions are still at play in contemporary denominational contexts and influence the response to new forms of expression and their relationship to authority. The sovereignty of God is still a frequent theme, as is the importance of a living confessional experience that allows for change in thought and form. In addition, there is the ever-present attempt to balance the role of human control and understanding with truth and God’s will within denominational settings. Aligning these concerns with CMC and cyber-religion highlights a number of issues already inherent in CMC.

The first of these is the lack of control implicit in CMC. Quality control is an issue on websites of all kinds. It is often difficult to tell if a site is authorized to include the content it offers, who is in charge, and whose voice is speaking. If blogging, wiki formats, and social networking sites (such as Facebook and Twitter) are added to the mix, it is nearly impossible to control who creates and disseminates authorized content and information. This question has direct bearing on the existence of an online church. Who has established the community and why? Is it an authorized community within a particular denomination? Is it organized and overseen by a committee, a founding individual, or group consensus? Is it reflective of a particular denominational doctrine, or is it able to pick and choose its content and practices? This is not an issue found solely in
online communities, of course. Many physical churches and “emergent” styles of worship are also questioned about their continuity and consistency with traditional doctrine and form. Perhaps the fact that this issue is found in a variety of situations, both physical and virtual, indicates a need to reconsider the place and function of tradition and authority within the church.

A second issue is the use of hyperlinks in CMC. As with social networking practices, hyperlinks complicate the issue of authority and control because of the limitless ability to expand connections with external sources and resources. If purity of doctrine is of concern, this is a huge problem because anyone can press a button and be directed to opinions that may or may not be relevant, appropriate, or truthful. This, in turn, empowers and heightens the role of individual and personal interpretation of doctrine, form, and practice.

Finally, a third longstanding issue that continues to exist with CMC is that of “discipline.” What is the appropriate behavior for a person in an online church? Are there institutionally structured and sanctioned disciplines essential to an online ecclesial community? Who is to monitor that, and how can it be monitored? Should it be monitored? Calvin, of course, was very detailed in his prescriptions for church discipline and polity, but because discipline was deemed secondary to doctrinal considerations his writings on church discipline were not implemented within all Reformed communities. If
discipline is potentially a non-essential component of church life, it becomes an issue for each individual site or community (especially if they are not part of a denomination) to determine the importance of discipline. This, of course, shifts authority to an implicit congregational polity and away from hierarchical structures of authority.

As noted above, all of these issues are also present in physical churches, suggesting that the same pitfalls and diversions are to be found in ecclesial bodies organized episcopally, presbyterially, or congregationally. There is little difference between our present confrontation with the unknown boundaries of cyberspace and evolving technologies and the experience of Christians in previous centuries who had to confront the challenges of the printed word and its explosion into the world. The availability of printed material dramatically increased the ability to rove from book to book, topic to topic, interpretation to interpretation, unfettered by a human authority determining what could or could not be read or thought. Perhaps the issues noted surrounding authority need to be reframed as a question of collaboration and communication rather than one of control and boundaries. As noted in Chapter Three, the

15 Calvin’s summation of the marks of the church did not include discipline: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and head, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.” Institutes, IV.1.7. Earlier expressions of Reformed thought, for example Zwingli’s interpretation, as well as later Reformed expressions of the marks of the church, did include discipline as a mark. The Geneva Confession of 1536, Article 18, includes the phrase “purely and faithfully preached, proclaimed, heard, and kept,” and the First Helvetic Confession of 1536 refers to the True Church having “visible signs, rites and ordinances.” (see Jan Rohls, Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 175-176. Miroslav Volf notes that “the English Separatists did not consider questions of church organization to be part of the ecclesiological adiaphora.” (Miroslav Volf, After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 132.
Reformed tradition has maintained a place for ongoing discernment of God’s Word and will by supporting synods and councils of pastors and theologians. Emergent theory and grass-roots movements are contemporary expressions of a more widely shared, participatory, and bottom-up form of decision making and authority.

Community

The community of believers, which we commonly call the church, is a central and foundational aspect of what it means to be Christian. Miroslav Volf uses the words of Matthew 18:20 “for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them” as the baseline for his understanding of the ecclesial community. Interestingly, just how this community of believers is defined has remained a source of debate and contention since the earliest days of Christianity. The creation of cyberspace has accentuated the discussion of the gathered community because it has opened an entirely new dimension to the concept of ‘gathering’. It is to be expected, therefore, that the debate about church

16 Calvin wrote: “…whenever a decree of any council is brought forward, I should like men first of all diligently to ponder at what time it was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present; then to examine by the standard of Scripture what it dealt with – and to do this in such a way that the definition of the council may have its weight and be like a provisional judgment…” (Institutes, IV.9.8; see also IV.9.2); Earlier, in Chapter Three, I offered additional background to the Reformed Tradition’s preference for a multi-vocal rather than univocal opportunity for discernment.

17 Miroslav Volf, After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 135. He goes on to quote John Smyth, an early English Separatist: “A visible communion of Saints is two, three, or more Saints joined together by covenant with God & themselves, freely to use all the holy things of God, according to the word, for their mutual edification, & Gods glory…This visible communion of Saints is a visible Church.” Calvin also deferred to the definition of church in Matthew 18:20, saying “…there exists no clearer promise…” (Institutes, IV.9.2) Barth also alludes to this passage (CD, IV.2.67, 699).
and cyberspace has to do with not only the nature and purpose of the church, but also the nature and purpose of community and gathering as a whole. In other words, what constitutes community? What is a gathering? How has community been defined and experienced in the past, and how is that changing?

Community as a sociological concept gained academic credence with the work of Ferdinand Tönnies in 1887 and his categories of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft*, or community, describes the association of individuals based on common values and shared interest. This might be based on family ties, shared belief systems, or a commitment to particular social institutions. *Gesellschaft*, or society, is a description of a more self-interested community. It is characterized by contractual arrangements rather than shared values. A working definition of a community using this framework could be: “a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government and often have a common cultural and historical heritage; a social, religious, occupational, or other group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society within which it exists.” A late twentieth century definition of community is slightly different: “Every cooperative group of people exists in the face of a competitive world because that group of people recognizes there is something valuable that they can gain only by banding together.”

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together. Looking for a group’s collective goods is a way of looking for the elements that bind isolated individuals into a community.\(^{20}\) The collective goods referred to are social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion (relationships). The concept of social capital is still evolving, but has been summarized as: “the intangible social features of community life—such as trust and co-operation between individuals and within groups, actions and behavior expected form community members, networks of interaction between community members, and actions taken by community members for reasons other than financial motives or legal obligations—that can potentially contribute to the wellbeing of that community.”\(^{21}\)

This definition assumes, at least in part, a social network view of community. Social networking theory contends that community is not defined by physical proximity but rather by networks of relationships that can extend over great distance and can be weak and strong, as well as both intimate and casual.\(^{22}\) Definitions formulated on the basis of Tönnies’ work assumed physicality and described community in both relational and functional ways, as rooted in a localized, often rural situation of a pre-industrialized society where stability, familiarity, and frequent physical contact were normative. It is questionable, however, if this view was ever normative, or as delightful as it is


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 388; he is quoting a group from the University of Victoria, British Columbia.

\(^{22}\) Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith, “Communities in Cyberspace,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17.
romanticized to be. It has even been suggested that a “traditional” understanding of community is closer to a wishful construction of modernist thinking than it ever was to a reality. For example, people that live near each other may not actually know each other, or they may know each other so slightly that little or no social capital is exchanged. It is also less likely in the “traditional” view of community that sufficient numbers and varieties of people were known to permit the kind of support and resourcing that is considered optimal in the twenty-first century.23

Social networking, however, does seem to represent reality across centuries and cultures, as well as across media, emphasizing the enduring longing for interaction and connection even when not experienced geographically. The New Testament inclusion of letters written from great distances attests to the “networked” world even then. Social networking is clearly visible in CMC as relationships, support systems, and information networks which serve to form an enduring, and nurturing, community, and has over time begun to displace the privileged position of geography as the determining factor in defining community.

There are, of course, additional ways to consider communities. Another approach is to look at community through the lens of space and place. This is not new in the history of community studies, but it does call into question the interaction of space and

23 Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, “Virtual Communities as Communities: Net surfers don’t ride alone,” in Communities in Cyberspace, eds. Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 171.
time as well as the relationship of place and location. The concepts of space and place also bring to the fore the role of mental constructs of meaning that are associated with space and place. Place, for example, is much more personal than space, for it merges memory, meaning, and experience. Place is where one dwells, and space is an unknown frontier. We talk of wide open spaces for example but not wide open places. John Inge differentiates space and place: “When we think of space, most of us will tend to think of ‘outer space’ and ‘infinity’, but when we think of place, on the other hand, we will tend to think of locality, a particular spot. What is undifferentiated space becomes for us significant place by virtue of our familiarity with it. The two terms might be thought of as tending towards opposite ends of a spectrum which has the local at one end and the infinite at the other. Spaces are what are filled with places.”24

Edward S. Casey, in his study of the history of place, speaks of a sense of place as limitless: “We come, in short, to a world in places—a place-world that subsists in the many particular places that reflect it, much as the many waves of a sunlit sea reflect the circumambient light, each in its own manner. Places extend to world without end...place is to be recognized as an undelimited, detotalized expansiveness, resonating regionally throughout the unknown as well as the known universe.”25
Casey also speaks of place as “omni-located”: “To be somewhere in the universe—to be at a particular place in it—is to be everywhere through the same universe: efficacious throughout and thus omni-located...Or let us say, every place is everywhere—everywhere thanks to an unforecloseable causal efficacy, and thanks to the fact that a single place is capable of reflecting the whole universe of space.”

Casey indicates that even though CMC has moved our “place” into space, this does not make us less concerned with or less needful of a sense of place. Rather, the speed with which we pass through places in CMC makes us even more appreciative of the places we barely encounter.

Casey comes to these conclusions after reviewing the historic role of place (which is frequently neglected or even invisible to thoughtful critique) and noting that post-modern thinking has moved away from geographic specificity towards a more dynamic view of place as “no fixed thing: it has no steadfast essence.” He continues by suggesting current trends in place theory:

1. Each [of the rediscoverers of the importance of place] tries to find place at work, part of something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient in something else: in the course of history (Braudel, Foucault), in the natural world (Berry, Snyder), in the political realm (Nancy, Lefebvre), in gender relations and sexual difference (Irigaray), in the productions of poetic imagination (Bachelard, Otto), in geographic experience and reality (Foucault, Tuan, Soja, Relph, Entrekin), in the sociology of the polis and the city (Benjamin, Arendt, Walter), in nomadism

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26 Ibid., 336.
27 Ibid., 343, fn.4.
28 Ibid., 286.
(Deleuze and Guattari), in architecture (Derrida, Eisenman, Tschumi), in religion (Irigaray, Nancy).\textsuperscript{29}

As place theory moves beyond Enlightenment thinking it has relinquished its linear and reasoned boundaries and become much more fluid and porous. For example, place was at one time defined by boundaries: in or out, here or there. Containment (the establishment of boundaries) speaks to the need for control, authority, and exclusivity.\textsuperscript{30} Casey speaks of this traditional view of place in contrast to Irigaray’s development of the idea that a woman’s body is the new paradigm for place:

Irigaray proposes the female body as the scandalous exception that proves the rule: it is a paradigm of place and yet is neither unperforated nor stationary. Quite to the contrary, it is always (at least slightly) open and always (to some degree) moving… \textit{(the sexually differentiated) body and (its) place are so intimately linked as to be virtually interchangeable}. The point is not just that there is no place without body, or vice versa, but that body itself is place and that place is as body-bound as the body itself is sexually specific…both place and body lose the inelastic and rigid moorings to which they are consigned in straitened physical and metaphysical models, for example, those of \textit{res extensa} or God as First Mover. Liberated from these moorings, each takes on properties of the other: place becomes porous (and not just closed) and body becomes surrounding (and not just surrounded). Both become entities in movement, and they move together.\textsuperscript{31}

Place and space, then, have converged into an omni-located way of being and existing that is embodied and boundless at the same time; simultaneously particular and specific while being open and dynamic. Casey, in this understanding of place, invites the

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 325.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 326-327. Emphasis in the original.
reader to reconsider traditional definitions of place that are fixed and contained and to move toward a sense of place that permits multiple habitations simultaneously, with a reminder that “nothing is nowhere; everything is somewhere.” Coinciding with this sense of place as omni-local is the opportunity to consider the mnemonic aspects of place that tie our memory, emotions, and individual experiences to place.

For example, Philip Sheldrake suggests considering the role of meaning and memory in establishing places: “Place is a space that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious…. We do not dwell in pure nature but in ‘the realm of mediated meaning.”32 Place continues to be defined in a number of ways, many of which are not geographical. Michel de Certeau claims that “narrative structures have the status of spatial syntaxes.” He goes on to say “Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces.”33 E. V. Walker describes place in relational terms, integrating relationships with the way the place is experienced.34

Each of these strands of thought on place as intertwined with memory and meaning are not examples of place unmoored from physicality. However, they do suggest the range of nuances and possibilities inherent in contemporary place theory that

32 Philip Sheldrake, Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 1, 3.


34 Inge, 26.
is looking beyond fixed geographical views of place, and may, thereby, provide a
grounding for a cyber-ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{35}

It is difficult, however, to relinquish spatial assumptions about community and
location. In traditional discussions of community prior to the advent of CMC, a
particular set of assumptions has been at work in definitions of community and location.
Most notably would be the assumption that physical presence precedes community
relationships. Physical presence, in turn, implies particular embodied notions of location,
geography, and time. For example, one could only be in one place at a time. Writing a
letter could, of course, extend your reach, but it was not the same as being there. The
attachment to the idea of being able to be in only one particular place/space at a time
reflects the linear orientation of a print culture, including the idea of a routine, stable,
predictable progression from one place/space to another.

This linear sense of time and place is reflected in technological developments in a
number of ways, and through a variety of means: telecommunications (telegraph,
telephone, teletype), motorized travel (which shortened travel time and compressed time),
radio and television (which was experienced both live and taped, allowing for both a real-
time connection as well as repeated experiences of the same thing), and finally CMC.
Time is now measured in nano seconds as space has both expanded and contracted—but

\textsuperscript{35} For additional views of place and space, see Edward S. Casey, \textit{The Fate of Place: A
Philosophical History} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Yi-Fu Tuan, \textit{Space and Place: The
Perspective of Experience} (St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, 1977); Marc Augé, \textit{non-places:
either way it is still navigated with the correct technology. When place is potentially
detached from spatial constraints and viewed as omni-located (Casey) or as rooted in
relationships (Walker) or in narrative (Certeau) human dwelling, gathering, and
interaction is freed to occur anywhere.

Likewise, changes in the way we define and imagine community shape and reflect
changes in the way we define the church as community. What were once comfortable
images and analogies no longer describe the phenomena of human gathering. Whereas
once physical presence attached to a place was assumed when describing a gathering, it
can no longer be assumed. With CMC we can assume a physical being is somewhere
behind the online presence, but it is the collective gathering of online presences that make
up a gathering. Thus, when we talk about defining an online community, can we use the
traditional language to speak of it, or the same norms to judge it? Location, presence,
dwelling, “real” church or “virtual” church become words laden with value (and
judgment) from a time when physicality was an implicit and privileged bottom-line in all
things.

While such assumptions may be true for the secular understanding of community,
they do not necessarily apply to Christian concepts of community, space, and time. The
boundaries between past, present, and future have always been fluid in Christianity, and
the definition of church has been understood in a myriad of ways.\textsuperscript{36} For example, the concept of “mystery” is present, as in the work of the Holy Spirit. The Christian understanding of time and of what happened in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, or what happened at Pentecost, and what continues to happen to people in relationship to these experiences is interpreted and considered through an eschatological understanding of time and place. For example, the idea that “I will be with you always” is not a concept that adheres to our traditional conceptions of time or place. Or consider monastic communities, which Sheldrake describes as places formed to replicate and realize the Kingdom of God: “Its specific purpose and power within the Christian community is to be a place that, while socially and culturally ‘eccentric’, is paradoxically where people seek to live out the imaginative world of the Kingdom in radical terms."\textsuperscript{37} These are not questions or considerations that only emerged with the growth of CMC. They are, however, enlivened by the possibility of a community that is located in the non-physicality of cyberspace. Three associated topics deserve particular elaboration: the definition of a church community, time, and location.

As previously noted, the church as community has a long history of interpretation and function. Three aspects of these historical conversations may be useful. First is the consideration of two Greek words used to describe the church: \textit{koinonia} and \textit{ecclesia}.\textsuperscript{36,37}


\textsuperscript{37} Sheldrake, 90.
Koinonia, the Greek word for fellowship or communion in relationship, is not necessarily attached to geographical location, and refers to intimate participation, a communion, within the church and within the Trinity. George Hunsinger describes Barth’s views of koinonia: “‘Communion’ means love in knowledge, and knowledge in love, thus fellowship and mutual self-giving…The deepest form of communion, as depicted in the New Testament, is mutual indwelling, an I–Thou relation of ineffable spiritual intimacy (koinonia).”\(^\text{38}\) Barth refers to it as “mutual love” within the community: “it takes place that the men united in it do what is not done elsewhere: upholding one another instead of causing one another to fall; serving one another by love instead of ruling over one another…”\(^\text{39}\) Ecclesia is the word most often defined as church, and can mean either an assembly of people or a place of assembly. Koinonia points toward a meaning and purpose of a group, and ecclesia lends a structure to the group. These terms have merged over the centuries in popular conceptions of the church, but they could serve as a way to reconsider the intent and relationality of a gathered group. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has recently emphasized communion ecclesiology.\(^\text{40}\)


Roman Catholic communion ecclesiology is described by Doyle as:

an attempt to move beyond the merely juridical and institutional understandings [of Church] by emphasizing the mystical, sacramental, and historical dimensions of the Church. It focuses on relationships, whether among the persons of the Trinity, among human beings and God, among the members of the Communion of Saints, among members of a parish, or among the bishops dispersed throughout the world. It emphasizes the dynamic interplay between the Church universal and the local churches. Communion ecclesiology stresses that the Church is not simply the receiver of revelation, but as the Mystical Body of Christ is bound up with revelation itself.  

Volf offers a definition of Free Church communion ecclesiology: “A participative model of the church requires more than just values and practices that correspond to participative institutions. The church is not first of all a realm of moral purposes; it is the anticipation, constituted by the presence of the Spirit of God, of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God in the communion of the triune God.”

The church has also been characterized as both visible and invisible. Augustine wrote at great length about the “city of God” and its material and spiritual dimensions, and his teachings have been replicated and nuanced over the centuries. Calvin, for one, was an advocate of this doctrine and considered it essential to believe in both the visible and invisible dimensions of the church: “Just as we must believe, therefore, that the


42 Volf, 257.

former church, invisible to us, is visible to the eyes of God alone, so we are commanded to revere and keep communion with the latter, which is called “church” in respect to men.  

The fact that a common understanding of church has an invisible dimension which is not bounded geographically has immense implications for cyber-communities because it permits an expansive interpretation of community that may well reach beyond human understanding.

The third theological consideration for an understanding of community is based in the concept of *adiaphora*, the doctrine of non-essentials. The concept of *adiaphora* is another way to define church, though it is rarely an explicit consideration. The question is: what aspects of the church community are essential? Is a geographic location essential? Which forms are essential to a Christian community? For Calvin (who would have had no need to address such a thing) the essential elements were to be found within the Word of God as known through Scripture. As noted in the earlier discussion on authority, doctrine was privileged over form. The Word, the sacraments, and preaching were the essential marks of the church in Calvin’s thought, and it is interesting to note that these are not necessarily as attached to physicality as they were in the sixteenth century. In considering CMC as a venue for ecclesial gatherings, it is clear that some aspects of *adiaphora*, as well as marks of the church, are more easily translatable into cyberspace than others. The Word, as text to be read, and preaching, as the Word

\[\text{44 Calvin, Institutes, IV.1.7.}\]
heard, can be accessed through a variety of electronic media. The sacraments, however, pose a more difficult transition because of their corporeal nature. This topic will be raised in greater detail in the following section on mediation. As with the previous two concepts impacting an understanding of community—koinonia and the tension between the visible and invisible church—a reconsideration of adiaphora may prove helpful to envisioning the church community.

A second topic vital to this conversation is time. Time is the invisible force at work in community, which has changed the landscape of community life. What has not changed is the Christian commitment to an alternative sense of time: kairos. There are two Greek words for time: chronos and kairos. The world operates on chronos time, a linear approach defined by sequential moments that progress steadily into the future. Kairos time, on the other hand, allows for a simultaneity of experience that is pure mystery. Because kairos is not predictable, controllable, or geographically bound, it can be experienced anywhere. The work of the Holy Spirit is associated with kairos time, as are mystical experiences and the doctrine of eschatology. Time is also an important question in CMC, because as new technologies emerge—such as the increasing sophistication of podcasting, texting, and synchronic communications, the sense of time (and space) is condensed and flattened. Time is no longer attached necessarily to active engagement (something that is true of email and bulletin board communication which often involves time delays) now that live telecasts of worship can be downloaded and viewed at will while mimicking the sense of active, synchronic participation. Chronos
time becomes a convergence of synchronous and asynchronous experiences that can be confusing.

Time cannot be separated from space, however, which is the third topic under consideration: location. Everything happens somewhere, as Casey noted. Thus, a *kairos* moment can define any location in which it is experienced. The location of the *kairos* moment is, in a sense, secondary to the meaning of the particular moment in time. Vítor Westelle calls this “epiphanic space,” a place that holds meaning and value to those who have experienced the holy there. 45 This may be a personal experience that is cognitively based. Or it may be a church building or other sacred structure, but it could just as well be found in a shrine where a Marian apparition occurred (Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal, Our Lady of Lourdes in France), in a geographic region (the Holy Land, Rome, Croagh Patrick in Ireland), or in the presence of particular people (Mother Teresa, Saint Francis, Billy Graham). Epiphanic space is that convergence of location and time that makes the ordinary into the extraordinary, the common into the sacred. For example, one person may walk through the streets of Jerusalem as a tourist and will enjoy many great sites and experiences. A religious pilgrim can walk the same routes and experience epiphanic space because of the meanings embedded in the route itself.

Geographic location has been an automatic and unquestionable assumption in defining sacred space and individual experience. Pilgrimages, for example, were

physical experiences in a particular location. Community was associated with a particular place. If members were away, they may be able to connect to the community through letters or phone calls, but generally the church community was stationary, remaining in one place. That is, of course, one way to think about place. Yet if we consider Certeau’s image of place residing in a narrative—a story into which we merge and find our meaning and value—geographic place becomes just one (albeit essential) dimension of place rather than its norm. William Cavanaugh, by way of another example, has written of the communion wafer as the place of Christian community, uniting both the local and the universal in a particular sacred act and moment: “The consumer of the Eucharist begins to walk in the strange landscape of the body of Christ, while still inhabiting a particular earthly place. Now the worldly landscape is transformed by the intrusions of the universal body of Christ in the particular interstices of local space…. Practicing the narrative of the body of Christ collapses spatial barriers, but in a way very different from globalizing capitalism…. In Eucharistic space, by contrast, we are not juxtaposed but identified.”

These alternative views to the traditional concept of place do assume practices and participation in the community in some way. Certeau most certainly grounds his thoughts on spatial narratives in practices, noting that “Every story is a travel story—a

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Nicholas Healy notes that much of recent theology actually privileges practices over meaning, thereby restricting—or at least diverting—our attention from the meaning behind the practice and encouraging the focus on localization and neglecting the work of the Spirit. When we rank the value of practices, we are losing something valuable:

This is inadequate for at least two reasons. First, it relies upon a notion of practices and doctrines that omits both sociological and theological considerations of their concrete performance and application. Second, it seems unable to account for a common belief within the church, namely that in the past, the Spirit has prompted some theologians and church leaders to challenge these parameters and accepted ranking, to condemn or reinterpret established practices and reject the established ‘theorems’ of past doctrine. Luther did so, surely, in many ways, as did Barth, in his doctrine of election, for example….The Spirit not only works within the church’s traditions and practices, but also apart from them and even, at times, over against them, so as to destabilize what is settled and secure, whether through individual Christians or movements of reform, through scripture, events or worldly challenges.\(^{48}\)

Clearly, any discussion of community contains a discernable tension between the tangible aspects of community life and the doctrines and meaning that informs these tangibles. Karl Barth’s use of dialectic in his theology—the constant reminder of the yes/no of all human expression of God’s Word—could be appropriately applied here, for it acknowledges the existence of one thing while pointing to that which lies beyond. In

\(^{47}\) Certeau, 115.

the interplay of ecclesiology and CMC the tension between that which is tangible and physically experienced—as opposed to that which is mediated by computers rather than face to face or in person—is observable not only in the definitions of community. It is also acutely present in the remaining two themes to be explored, mediation and embodiment, which are explicitly embodied categories of experience within the Christian tradition.

**Mediation**

Christianity is a mediated religion, a mediated faith. All we know about the Triune God is through revelation—God’s purposeful mediation of Godself to creation. The ways in which God has revealed Godself have been varied, and has included visions, angels, words, burning bushes, miracles, a son, a church, and many others ways. It is therefore ironic that a major criticism of the cyber-church is its inability to mediate God’s revelation or authentic Christian community. It is ironic because criticisms of CMC as a functional forum for faithful mediation assumes that there are necessary conditions for God’s revelations (conditions that exclude cyberspace). Nonetheless, the question of the ability of cyberspace to mediate particular aspects of Christianity adequately may be a reasonable question.

Perhaps the most obvious example of mediatory difficulty of cyberspace arises with the performance of the sacraments online. The two sacraments of the Reformed Tradition are baptism and Eucharist. Both involve physical objects and human participation. Both are grounded in Scripture and are considered to be marks of the
church. Therefore, they are essential acts of a faithful church community. I will consider only one of the sacraments, the Eucharist, and its intersection with CMC.

Within the Protestant context there is an extraordinary range of meanings and practices associated with the Eucharist. As noted in chapter three, the spectrum of denominations and groups that fall loosely under the umbrella of the Reformed Tradition is vast, and includes understandings of sacraments that are to the left of Zwingli’s position of “real absence” (Quaker and Christian Science, for example, which do not include any physical components) to high liturgical communities like the Episcopalians and others that near the position of transubstantiation. At either end of the spectrum—and everywhere in between—the work of the Holy Spirit is a vital, though often an implicit rather than explicit, component of the sacrament. Thus, any discussion of the sacrament as a medium for encountering God must include the role and work of the Holy Spirit.

The role of ordained clergy in the Eucharist is one of the difficulties here. John Calvin was clear in his declaration that ordained clergy are essential to the work of the church: “For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink, are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth.”49 And one reason the officers of the church are necessary

49 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.3.2.
is to “keep doctrine whole and pure among believers.”\textsuperscript{50} At the time Calvin wrote, it was beyond imagination that a lay person would be empowered to carry out the functions of the pastoral office, and clearly most groups within the Reformed Tradition have not dismissed the clerical presence as archaic and unnecessary.

Calvin was also concerned about the need for public expression of sacramental acts. Calvin found it reprehensible that “private masses” would be held without the presence or participation of the entire community:

I say that private masses are diametrically opposed to Christ’s institution, and are for that reason an impious profaning of the Sacred Supper. For what has the Lord bidden us? Is it not to take and divide among us [Luke 22:17]? What kind of observance of the command does Paul teach? Is it not the breaking of bread, which is the communion of body and blood [1 Cor. 10:16]? When, therefore, one person receives it without sharing, what similarity is there? But that one man, they say, does it in the name of the whole church. By what command? Is this not openly to mock God, when one person privately seizes for himself what ought to have been done only among many?\textsuperscript{51}

Both of these concerns—who fulfills pastoral responsibilities and the public expression of the Eucharist—are more easily met in a physical setting than in CMC. Yet an even more fundamental issue with CMC and the Eucharist is the mediatory properties of the Eucharist within cyberspace. The meaning of the mediation of God’s grace was also one of the issues of the Reformation, dividing not only Roman Catholics and Protestants but also Protestants among themselves. The Roman Catholic doctrine of

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., IV.3.4.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., IV.18.8.
transubstantiation, in which the body and blood of Christ is truly present in the bread and wine, was not acceptable to many of the Reformers. The Reformed Tradition had, as it still does, a range of understandings, from what is called “real absence” in Zwingli to Luther’s position of the “real presence.” Calvin held a compromising view which kept together the spiritual and the real presence. It is not, in this view, that the bread and wine change in substance, but the spiritual being of Christ is now present:

Our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life. For the analogy of the sign applies only if souls find their nourishment in Christ – which cannot happen unless Christ truly grows into one with us, and refreshes us by the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood. Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.52

The role of the Holy Spirit is an essential element in maintaining the efficacy of the Eucharist: “the sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, the inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing.”53

One of the factors that comes to light in Calvin’s discussion on the Eucharist is what has come to be known as the *Extra-Calvinisticum*: “The so-called extra

52 Ibid., IV.17.10; see also lv.17.3-7.

53 Ibid., IV.14.9.
Calvinisticum teaches that the eternal Son of God, even after the Incarnation, was united to the human nature to form One Person but was not restricted to the flesh.” 54 The debate about the two natures of Christ is not original with Calvin. 55 It can be found in a number of places in his writings, and is remarkably consistent:

For what does all Scripture more clearly teach than that Christ, as he took our true flesh when he was born of the virgin and suffered in our true flesh when he made satisfaction for us, so also received that same true flesh in his resurrection, and bore it up to heaven? For we have this hope of our resurrection and of our ascension into heaven: that Christ rose again and ascended, and, as Tertullian says, bore the guarantee of our resurrection with him to heaven. But how weak and fragile that hope would be, if this very flesh of ours had not been truly raised in Christ, and had not entered into the Kingdom of Heaven! But is the true nature of a body to be contained in space, to have its own dimensions and its own shape. Away, then, with this stupid fiction which fastens both men’s minds and Christ to bread! 56


55 Calvin’s position was based firmly on Augustine’s work, as can be noted in the footnotes contained in the Institutes, for example II.16.14fn36. Willis traces the development of the Extra-Calvinisticum directly through the work of Peter Lombard (as well as other medieval theologians) and his totus/totum distinction (which Lombard based on John of Damascus). The totus/totum distinction emerged in Lombard’s Christology. Totus refers to hypostasis, or person, and totum refers to nature. Calvin relied on this distinction frequently. For example: “because he who watches over and tends all parts of heaven and earth and who by his mastery regulates and controls all things above and below cannot be enclosed in a place. Yet by the name Christ I embrace the whole Person of the only begotten son, as he was manifested in the flesh. I say that that one, God and man, is everywhere by mastery and incomprehensible power and infinite glory – just as the faithful experience his presence by evident effects. And Paul is not beside the point when he proclaims that Christ dwells in us (Eph. 3, 17). But there is no sense in twisting what is said about the immensity of power, which appears in spiritual gifts and in all the invincible aid for our salvation, to make it apply to the essence of the flesh. I wish at least that many who with little reason are angry with us would remember that trite saying which is famous in the Papal schools: ‘Christus ubiique totus est sed non totum.’” (quoted in Willis, p. 32-33) Willis also claims that Calvin relied heavily on Augustine. Augustine wrote: “He remains as he is, and he is everywhere whole. But he comes when he is manifested, and he goes away when he is hidden. Yet he is present whether hidden or manifested, as light is present to the eyes of the seeing and the blind, but is present to the seeing as present and present to the blind as absent.” (quoted in Willis, pp. 46-47). For a historical overview of Calvin’s sources on this theme, see all of chapter two, pp. 26-60.

56 Calvin, Institutes, IV.17.29; see also IV.17.31-34; IV.17.12.
For Calvin, God simply cannot be contained in one location in the manner described by the doctrine of transubstantiation. The resurrection of Christ is everywhere. The *Extra-Calvinisticum* came into play during the early debates between Luther and Reformed theologians. It was first of all a discussion on the nature of Christ, and secondly a concern about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Both Luther and Calvin wished to affirm the unity of Christ, but their methods differed:

Both were intent on confessing that in this One Person, in this fashion, and in this Incarnate Lord, God himself was dealing with the world. And both were intent on affirming that the Incarnation did not require that the Eternal Word cease to govern the universe. But on this last point the Lutherans generally insisted that the majesty of Christ’s humanity exalted it, by virtue of the *communicatio idiomatum*, to governing the universe in union with the divine nature. The Reformed theologians never agreed with the Lutherans that Christ’s humanity shared the majesty of the divine nature. They resorted instead to a more traditional provision for the Word’s governance of the universe after the Incarnation: the doctrine that the Incarnate Lord never ceased to have his existence *etiam extra carnem* [even outside the flesh].

Calvin sought to keep God’s majesty intact while fully acknowledging the divine nature of Christ: “The Eternal Son never ceases to have his empire over all things. In the Incarnation he ‘goes out of his way,’ without leaving that eternal way of boundless power and majesty, to rule over the rebellious creatures attempting to disrupt the continuity of gracious order. He does not abdicate his eternal empire but extends it over sinners. He can be Lord in the human predicament he humbly assumed because he never ceases to be

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57 Willis, 24-25.
Lord over it according to the Father’s will and with his Spirit."\(^{58}\) In other words, the Incarnation was local and specific but never ceased to be simultaneously boundless.

The second impact of the *Extra-Calvinisticum* is on Calvin’s understanding of the Eucharist. As noted above, he was unable to consider the localized sacrament of bread and water as Christ’s body and blood because the body of Christ was gone in its flesh. Christ’s spiritual presence continues to be everywhere, but the flesh will not be present until the eschaton: “Therefore, since the whole Christ is everywhere, our Mediator is ever present with his own people, and in the Supper reveals himself in a special way, yet in such a way that the whole Christ is present, but not in his wholeness. For as has been said, in his flesh he is contained in heaven until he appears in judgment.”\(^{59}\)

The implications of this concept for cyber-communion are immense on at least two fronts. If the presence of Christ is not limited to the particular object at hand (bread and cup), then it should be possible to celebrate communion/God’s presence even without those particular symbols. Or, even if the particular objects you have at hand have not been part of an official Eucharistic rite and blessing, they may still contain the risen Christ because they are a part of creation, in which Christ is always present.

But the discussion really hinges on three factors: first, the necessity of the physical objects/signs, secondly the necessity of a particular blessing so as to evoke the

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 154.

\(^{59}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.30.
body and blood of Christ, and finally the presence of properly instituted clergy. For those churches that require this, for example the Roman Catholic Church, it remains difficult to imagine engagement in cyber-communion. For those who subscribe to the doctrine of the spiritual real presence, it may be possible. There have been many suggestions as to how to engage in cyber-communion. Douglas Estes, in his book *SimChurch*, suggests four models for cyber-communion, each of which is reliant upon the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰

The first method he calls “symbolic virtual Communion.” This method may or may not use bread and wine, leaving that decision up to the individual participant. The participant reads online about Communion and meditates upon its meaning and purpose. The second method is “avatar-mediated virtual Communion” which assumes increased use of technology just by its name. Each participant has chosen an avatar and the avatars interact and dispense Communion among themselves. This method, unlike the first one, assumes interaction with others online in some sort of three dimensional virtual world. A third method, “extensional virtual Communion,” requires the physical presence of bread and wine. Estes describes this method as drawing upon the ancient practice of delivering Communion to people who are not able to be present at the Communion table: “In this practice, a virtual church shares Communion together (telepresent in real time in synthetic space) using real elements that have been extended to members of the community in some manner by the pastor or priest. For example, I might log into my

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⁶⁰Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 116-123.
regular internet campus, and when the pastor brings out the bread and the cup for the congregation during the live service, I use prepared bread and juice to observe Communion along with the rest of my virtual church (typing or speaking, “He did this for you,” to others in the forum). The final approach Estes suggests is “outsourced virtual Communion,” which involves the online church establishing a relationship with a physical church and arranges for the online churchgoers to attend and receive Communion at the physical church. The benefit here is that the issue of virtuality is sidestepped entirely. It is also a way to overcome the bifurcation between the physical and online communities because it acknowledges the existence of both and the fact that our lives are not limited to only one dimension of existence.

All churches, of course, rely on the work of the Holy Spirit in mediating God and God’s will to us. Some groups are particularly noted for their reliance on the Holy Spirit, including the Pentecostals and Charismatics. Many churches within the Reformed Tradition have not been as explicit in their acknowledgement of the Spirit. This is not because of a feeble pneumatology in Calvin’s or in Barth’s writings. Indeed, in both of these theologians the Holy Spirit is the moving force that makes God’s revelation possible at all. Calvin wrote that “the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the

\[61\text{Ibid., 120-121.}\]
Karl Barth was equally insistent upon the necessity of the Holy Spirit in knowing God and God’s work among us: “Exegetically most obscure but materially of crucial importance is the fact that the Spirit is the great and only possibility in virtue of which men can speak of Christ in such a way that what they say is witness and that God’s revelation in Christ thus achieves new actuality through it…. Is not the relation between the Spirit and the Church, or the relation between the Spirit and the will of the Lord of the Church which is to be executed, the dominating factor which governs all the rest?”

Because of koinonia—the intimacy and fellowship of communion within the Trinity and therefore within the community as a whole—the work of the Holy Spirit has the possibility of mediating revelation in a variety of forms, or media. A burning bush was a medium for Moses, as was the Great Flood in Noah’s time. Ultimately, the medium is the message: the work of the Holy Spirit can transform the most ordinary artifacts of daily life into a means of grace and a sign of Christ’s presence. In the New Testament Christ is the medium and sign of a new revelation, followed by the gifts of tongues and prophecy, healing and teaching, and so many more signs that were offered. Many count icons, statues, geographical sites and traditional rituals as means of grace.

62 Calvin, Institutes, I.7.4; see also III.1.1.

The current ecclesiological emphasis on practices is a renewed expression of grace located in our lived experience as a sign of God’s presence and the work of the Spirit. Serene Jones invokes Reformed theology by speaking of sanctification and justification as key concepts of a grace that “frees us and forms us.” “God forgives and frees us by a grace that we cannot merit; we are justified and hence saved by an act of divine love that comes to us as pure gift. Similarly, the grace that frees us is also sanctifying grace, which forms in us a pattern of living that reflects the structure of that freeing love. As two parts of the unified reality of God’s love for us, justification and sanctification thus describe the twofold character of the grace that saves.”

Volf and Bass define the role and meaning of practices: “Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Focusing on practices invites theological reflection on the ordinary, concrete activities of actual people – and also on the knowledge of God that shapes, infuses, and arises from these activities.”

Practices, I contend, are one type of medium. Over the course of time,

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64 Serene Jones, “Graced Practices: Excellence and Freedom in the Christian Life,” in Practical Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Press, 2002), 58; Jones goes on to quote Calvin’s words on the issue: “[T]he sum of the gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins. Any discussion of faith, therefore, that omitted these two topics would be barren and mutilated and well-nigh useless. Now, both repentance [sanctification] and forgiveness of sins [justification] — that is, newness of life and free reconciliation — are conferred on us by Christ, and both are attained by us through faith. As a consequence, reason and order of teaching demand that I begin to discuss both.” (Institutes, III.3.1.)

technological media have also served the purpose of conveying a sign of God’s presence and power, including letter writing, devotional literature, manuals for living, radio and TV broadcasts, and perhaps now cell phones and computers that connect people in some unseen and mystical way to a power and gift that has often been called the Holy Spirit but which can never be identified with any single medium.

**Embodiment**

Physicality is our normative state of being. It is not, however, our only way of being. We are also creatures of the mind and soul. We are also creatures who seek to extend ourselves beyond our bodies through a variety of technologies that make us faster and more efficient at everything we do. Until fairly recently, our mind—and perhaps our soul—could be communicated with others through the technologies of writing and reading, which helps to explain the dominance of sacred texts in so many religious traditions. Yet within the last century technologies have permitted us to communicate without physicality in once unimaginable ways. First there was the telegraph, then the telephone, the radio, television, the teletype, and eventually the Internet and cyberspace. CMC now allows us to view and chat with one another anytime and anywhere an internet connection is available. We can communicate with groups of people gathered together in one place sharing a screen, or with individuals disseminated across the globe but connected by CMC. We can look at each other, listen and talk to one another, and interact almost as if we are face to face in the same place. Essentially, our physical presence is no longer necessary to facilitate an embodied experience with another.
However, our physical being is a necessity in this process. At the time of this writing, the technology is not yet commercially available for us to simply think our machines into communicative activity. Our interactions and communications via computers is still human interaction because it is generated by a human being. In that sense our lives in cyberspace are always embodied. But the fact that our gathered physical bodies are not required to be in the same physical location in order to interact relationally and intimately in a cohesive community can lead to the position that cyberspace as a legitimate ecclesial location is impossible. Based on traditional Christologies, the incarnational miracle of Jesus Christ as both divine and human is not present or honored in cyber-relationships and cyber-communities because of the bifurcation of body and relationship. This is not necessarily true, however, because it is based on a number of assumptions and issues that need reconsideration.

The initial starting point for addressing embodiment and CMC is the doctrine of Incarnation. Calvin’s expression of the Incarnation falls within traditional orthodox boundaries:

The [human] situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him. Hence, it was necessary for the Son of God to become for us “Immanuel, that is, God with us” [Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23], and in such a way that his divinity and our human nature might by mutual connection grow together. Otherwise the nearness would not have been near enough, nor the affinity sufficiently firm, for us to hope that God might dwell with us. So great was the disagreement between our uncleanness and God’s perfect purity!66

He goes on to describe in more detail the purpose of the Incarnation:

His task was so to restore us to God’s grace as to make of the children of men, children of God; of the heirs of Gehenna, heirs of the Heavenly Kingdom. Who could have done this had not the self-same Son of God become the Son of man, and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?...For the same reason it was also imperative that he who was to become our Redeemer be true God and true man. It was his task to swallow up death. Who but the Life could do this? It was his task to conquer sin. Who but very Righteousness could do this? It was his task to rout the powers of world and air. Who but a power higher than world and air could do this? Now where does life or righteousness, or lordship and authority of heaven lie but with God alone? Therefore our most merciful God, when he willed that we be redeemed, made himself our Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son [cf. Rom. 5:8].

Calvin’s position on the Incarnation was scripturally based, but so were many of the other doctrines of the Incarnations. As noted earlier in the discussion of the Extra-Calvinisticum, Lutherans and Calvinists were separated by a small difference in understanding of the eternal containment of the Incarnation in the world, but not by any difference in understanding of the salvific effect of the Incarnation. Both groups would agree that the intimate relationship between the divine and the human transforms the meaning of human experience and suggests the need to be involved within the material world to honor that transformative gift, just as God was involved with material existence. We have been called to live a life conformed to scriptural revelation and the example of Jesus Christ’s life:

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67 Ibid., II.12.2.
Scripture shows that God the Father, as he has reconciled us to himself in his Christ [cf. II Cor. 5:18], has in him stamped for us the likeness [cf. Heb. 1:3] to which he would have us conform....[Scripture] not only enjoins us to refer our life to God, its author, to whom it is bound; but after it has taught that we have degenerated from the true origin and condition of our creation, it also adds that Christ, through whom we return into favor with God, has been set before us as an example, whose pattern we ought to express in our life. What more effective thing can you require than this one thing? Nay, what can you require beyond this one thing? For we have been adopted as sons by the Lord with this one condition: that our life express Christ, the bond of our adoption. Accordingly, unless we give and devote ourselves to righteousness, we not only revolt from our Creator with wicked perfidy but we also abjure our Savior himself. 

For Calvin, because of the Incarnation, we are now able to embody the gift of God’s grace through our attitudes, relationships, practices, and experiences. This may include a variety of relationships, presumably, and certainly reflects an embodied ethical relationship with others as well as well-developed practices.

In reading this interpretation of the Incarnation, there is nothing to indicate that human relationships and community cannot reflect the divine presence in a variety of different forms and dimensions. Though we are accustomed to physical interaction as the way experience incarnational relationships, we need not limit the new possibilities of human interaction in CMC. For example, we must not forget that computer mediated relationships originate by intentional interaction of voluntary embodied participants. The venue, CMC, is quite different from previous normative venues, but the connection of embodied beings continues to be the basis for online communities. And if an embodied participant must originate the relationship, how is it that an embodied connection is not

68 Ibid., III.6.3.
being made? In addition, ethical behaviors and faithful practices have never been restricted to only the faith community: indeed, they are a visible sign to all the world of God’s transformative work. Thus, ethical relationships and practices may be embodied off-line even while other aspects of community relationships are enacted on-line. There is no indication that limiting human interaction to just one type of community is a requirement for faithful living.

Taking into consideration Calvin’s emphasis on the Extra-Calvinisticum, it would not be without precedent to question the limitation of the Incarnation to particular, localized physical experiences. To bind the work of the triune God to one particular dimension or location violates the principle of omnipresence which the Extra-Calvinisticum establishes as an invaluable corrective to a collapse of God’s power and majesty into the human dimension alone. It also reinforces the bias in traditional ecclesiologies that indicate physical congregations and communities are the only possible venue for the work of the Spirit and as means of grace. Certainly, as noted earlier, there were no other options when pre-nineteenth century theologians were writing. But in the twenty-first century the means of gathering and incarnating have multiplied.

A second assumption that is implicit in the denigration of cyberspace as in incarnational space is the correlation of being with physical presence. Looking back once again to early Christian letter writing and communications, it is apparent that a person’s being—character and faith in particular—were clearly able to be expressed in writing and could be held in great esteem. Consider the power of the Apostle Paul’s writings to
affect the community he was writing to as well as different communities for centuries to come. Even when the person was not present, his or her words carried a force and power granted through the presence of the Spirit and God’s grace. Oral story-telling was another format that upheld the reputation of the speaker and was able to communicate the power of faithfulness. Prior to the Gospels existing in written form, they were transmitted orally, and the story-teller was not the object of the story but rather the medium through which it was transmitted. The power of the Gospel was able to be transmitted even when the “bodies” in the story were not physically present.

That was possible, to be sure, because of their prior embodied testimony to the grace of God. Their works preceded them and marked them as followers of Christ. There is currently a renewed interest in works and practices of faith as both an expression of personal faith and community, as well as a disciplined way to engage God actively and responsively. Volf and Bass describe their emphasis on practices rather than Christian life as a whole: “Rather than speak of a Christian way of life as a whole, therefore, we shall speak of the ‘Christian practices’ that together constitute a way of life abundant. By ‘Christian practices’ we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the
life of the world.” Volf and Bass identify four key elements in the choosing among the wide variety of Christian practices available:

First, as meaningful clusters of human activity (including the activity of thinking) that require and engender knowledge on the part of practitioners, practices resist the separation of thinking from acting, and thus of Christian doctrine from Christian life. Second, practices are social, belonging to groups of people across generations – a feature that undergirds the communal quality of the Christian life. Third, practices are rooted in the past but are also constantly adapting to changing circumstances, including new cultural settings. Fourth, practices articulate wisdom that is in the keeping of practitioners who do not think of themselves as theologians.

These characteristics are one possible way of describing an incarnational faith.

Karl Barth, in a previous generation, also made a clear connection with Incarnation and ethics in writing about the life of the faithful:

the people of God in the world, are men whom the Holy One, the royal man Jesus Christ exalted in His death to fellowship with God, does not confront only in a certain objectivity, as the “historical Jesus,” as a problem set for them, as a possibility and chance offered them, or in such a way that they have still to actualize the relevance of His existence for themselves (and for all men). Do they not have to “wrestle” with Him? Later they do, and this in all seriousness. This is the problem of Christian ethics. But they have to do so only on the basis of the fact that there is no separation between Him and them, but only a companionship in which He Himself has set them as the One who has been raised again from the dead and lives, who was and is and will be in the power of the eternal will of God triumphing in His death, the crucified Lord of all men and therefore their Lord, and now their Lord in particular because it is not hidden from them, but revealed to them, that he is the Lord of all men and therefore their Lord.

69 Volf and Bass, 18. Emphasis in the original. It is interesting to note that in fn. 3 they indicate that they wish they had included “Jesus Christ” at the end of the definition “which would clarify the character and content of the active divine presence that is so central to our understanding of practices.”

70 Ibid., 6. Emphasis in the original.

71 CD, IV.2.66.2, 521.
Barth is insistent on the interconnections between faith in God’s saving work, the Incarnation, and ethical living. In order to “actualize the relevance of his existence,” the believer must “wrestle” with God and the question of how to live the life the Incarnation makes possible. While living an ethical and compassionate life as revealed by the Word is one of the most traditional ways of embodying the faith, Nicholas Healy has decried the “misplaced concreteness” associated with the recent emphasis on practices.\(^72\) Healy’s complaint is not with practices per se, but with the unintentional side-effect of limiting the work of the Spirit: “Faced with the confused and sinful practices and intentions and construals of our congregations, we need to know how the Holy Spirit, rather than being ‘bound’ to the church and its practices, can overcome the effects of the churches upon their membership, and the membership upon their churches, so that in spite of the church as well as by its help we may be sanctified and be brought closer to Christ.”\(^73\) Healy suggests that by limiting practices to particular activities and places we may be neglecting the work of the Holy Spirit. Associating Christian practices with a particular historical form, for example, may restrict the work of God in the world. Consider the categories of witness and testimony—often a source of verbal expressions of personal faith and God’s salvific work. If these forms can only be done authentically in a physical

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\(^72\) See fn.33 for additional references.

\(^73\) Healy, “Practices and the New Ecclesiology,” 303; he also comments on Barth’s failure to concretize enough (p. 296).
worship service, or on a door step, we are establishing dangerously limiting boundaries on the Holy Spirit. If, however, a blog can be considered a testimony, or a tweet is an act of witnessing, the Holy Spirit can be acknowledged as working in all the spaces humans inhabit. In this view, CMC can possibly extend the Incarnation into new worlds and in unexpected ways, thereby filling new voids with God’s presence. Honoring cyberspace as a part of God’s created order, where the union of the divine and the material remains intact, contributes to a more expansive and inclusive view of the Incarnation and the potential embodiment of every created dimension.

Honoring alternative readings of Christian tradition and doctrine is perhaps the first step in determining the ecclesial viability of the cyber-church. Christian history is filled with an array of models, doctrines, and practices that have served important roles in particular historical contexts and are now irrelevant, considered heretical, or set simply ignored. There may be value in re-assessing these neglected concepts to determine if threads of possibility can emerge to help us establish something new. The Reformed habitus lends itself to the consideration of alternative understandings, in part because of the strength of its ongoing confessional nature and its de-emphasis on historical manifestations of ecclesiology. Jürgen Moltmann noted that Reformed theologians “put more stock in innovation than tradition. This historical Word of God is the elusive origin
of the process; the eschatological kingdom of God, the expected goal.” 74 With eschatology as a core value the Reformed churches have often become a-historical and willing to forego many ecclesial traditions not rooted in Scripture. By privileging the Word, knowledge, and reason over tradition and experience, and when combined with the Augustinian notion of the visible and invisible church, communities within the Reformed Tradition became a place of faith and belief with a potentially fluid form. 75

There has always existed a tension between the physical and cognitive aspects of faith and life, and we are simply seeing them re-emerge in a new venue with slightly different emphases. The Gnostic heresy is one example of spiritual and cognitive interpretation of Christianity that denied the importance of the physical, and it is a heresy that is still found just below the surface of many beliefs and practices. 76 While the Reformed Tradition was cognitively energized by Enlightenment thinking and reason, the move in the twenty-first century is toward more unified expression of faith and practice that is a sensual and physical expression of faith which is less linear in its approach and more open and reflexive in its relationship to doctrine and tradition.


76 I recommend Mellor and Shilling’s book Re-Forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1997) as an excellent account of the intersection of theology, bodies, and community. They note that the Enlightenment era following the reformation had a Gnostic tendency that de-emphasized the body and caused a counter-movement evident in recent decades that is highly sensual and embodied.
It is just this sort of convergence of the new and the old I suggest needs to be examined in the process of discerning the ecclesiology of the cyber-church. I have considered the historical understanding of the four themes noted above, as found in a predominantly Reformed landscape and while considering where these issues might be reviewed, renewed, and expanded. Each of the four themes—authority, community, mediation, and embodiment—suggest possibilities that are already a part of the Christian tradition and experience but which have not been reviewed or developed in our current context. There are several threads of meaning which readily emerge.

The role of authority and online churches will be one of the most difficult concepts to re-negotiate. Most Christian communities have an established leadership and hierarchy, however loosely it may be organized. Nonetheless, emergent theory and the return to processes of dialogue and discernment that are grounded in a commitment to grass-root and multiple-voice participation indicates that other forms of authority may be workable. In the past, the base communities of Latin America and the house church movement in the US have developed using these more consensual and collaborative processes. If collaboration and communication is deemed to be as valuable as power and control, perhaps a collegial and consensual arrangement could be made, allowing for new leadership models to emerge. Historically, the concept of the priesthood of all believers could be a factor in determining the boundaries of authority within a cyber-church.  

77 Calvin, along with Luther, believed in the priesthood of all believers, though Calvin made few specific or systematic references to it. For example, Calvin wrote: “every member of the church is charged
Shared leadership, for example, or a rotating or elected form of leadership, might be another way to offer leadership without hegemony.

The definition of community has remained fluid since the founding of Christianity, and there is no reason to believe it will become static. However, we can reconsider and reclaim—and perhaps even develop—images of the church community that speak to the current context, both locally and globally. A serious study of place theories may be a place to begin, as they differentiate the many ways to think about our location in the world and our particular communities. When relationships and epiphanic moments are recognized as valuable aspects of a sense of place, it will supplement and expand the concept of place because it adds an entirely different sense from place defined as a building or a geographic location. Considering the biblical narrative to which Christians subscribe, and its emphasis upon relationship and revelation, a new understanding of location and belonging may emerge. All three of these alternative

with the responsibility of public edification according to the measure of his grace, provided he perform it decently and in order.” (Institutes, IV.1.12) Elsewhere he wrote: “[Christ] once for all offered a sacrifice of eternal expiation and reconciliation; now, having also entered the sanctuary of heaven, he intercedes for us. In him we are all priests [Rev. 1:6; cf. I Peter 2:9], but to offer praise and thanksgivings, in short, to offer ourselves ours to God.” (Institutes, IV.19.28) In addition to the scripture references noted, Calvin relied heavily upon I Corinthians 14: 29-33, 40 to reach his interpretation. In this manner of thinking, all Christians have equal status before God. Ordained clergy are not set apart as ontologically distinct, but rather as functionally distinct, called to serve the church by carrying out the marks of the church through preaching and the sacraments, as well as by living a disciplined life.

meanings of place may have merit. Combined with the continuous developments of
CMC technologies, it is also possible to imagine a time when communicating online will
be even more realistic.

Mediation in cyber-space will continue to be problematic for those who maintain
a doctrine of transubstantiation. Yet for those who lean more towards the view of
“spiritual presence,” the mediation of the signs of God’s grace may be able to occur as
technologies improve and as we modify our traditions to accommodate change. Calvin’s
view of the Extra-Calvinisticum may be an aid to expanding our understanding of the
sacramental presence, even as it reminds us to reconsider other doctrines and historic
traditions for ways in which the mediation of grace can be explained and experienced.
Further consideration of the mediation of God’s grace will require movement toward a
position that honors the possibility of “both/and” instead of polarizing the situation with a
“right/wrong” way of thinking. For example, there are a number of ways to participate in
the Eucharist, depending on the denominational affiliation. This is the lived experience
of the larger Christian community, as visits to different communities will reveal the many
variations in presentation and reception of the Eucharist.

The ethical dimensions of any conversation about embodiment are an indication
of one way to re-configure the issue of cyberspace as dis-embodied and non-
incarnational. Further explorations must acknowledge that participation in cyberspace
still requires an embodied being to interact with the computer. It is also true that not all
dimensions of embodiment need to be embedded within an online church. Just as we
gather in a physical church and then go out in the world to live faithfully and ethically, so it is with online Christians. Embodiment need not be restricted to face-to-face encounters, nor does the lack of face-to-face encounter need to imply an upsurge in Gnosticism or lack of engagement with the world. It may simply reflect the dispersal of the fellowship into the world to live out their faith.

In each of the four categories under consideration, three principles undergird the discussion. The first is the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit. Without the work of the Spirit, there is no life to the church or to its works. Practitioners need to remain faithful to processes of discernment and open to the work of the Spirit in potentially new and incomprehensible ways. The second principle draws upon Calvin’s understanding of God “accommodating” to the limits of human comprehension. Remembering that God’s revelation can change to fit the people and the context is a liberating concept that frees the church to allow new possibilities. It is our nature not to be able to understand everything or to know what the appropriate and faithful response is in every situation, but the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit work to move us in the direction God would have us go. Both the work of the Spirit and the accommodation of God to human limitations points to the third principle at work in this discussion: the need to remain dynamic and fluid in our interaction with revelation, and to not absolutize the structures and traditions we are familiar with (or may someday establish). Any reading of history and theology, any reading of the Scripture, indicates the variety of structures and meanings that have been meaningful and helpful during the course of Christian history.
It is a testimony to the human need for many different expressions of community, authority, and grace.
CHAPTER FIVE

COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

The Field of Communication Studies

The field of Communication Studies is a contentious one in which even the subject itself—communication—has no agreed upon definition. Nor is it agreed if communication is a primary or secondary process, if it includes non-intentional communicative acts, or if it is really communication that has occurred if it is not received. In addition, because communication touches upon so many different academic fields, the definition at work in each theory often reflects the interests of the particular researcher and agenda. With this eclectic range of possible definitions and agendas in mind, I would like to focus on three definitions of communication that are concrete as well as expansive and open to new interpretations. These have been selected to represent the variety of possible definitions, not because they themselves are ultimately definitive or even broadly representative. The first is a basic text-book definition: “Communication is a social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment.”¹ This definition acknowledges both a sender and a receiver, the symbolic content of communication episodes, and the impact of the situation and overall environment.

James Carey, a noted scholar of communication, suggests two definitions of communication that are not mutually exclusive but do focus on distinctly different processes and purposes. He first suggests the transmission view of communication as being the dominant view in US communication research, and his second is the ritual view of communication as present, though less developed. For Carey, both of these views of communication are rooted in religion. Carey defines the transmission view of communication as “a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people.”

He bases this upon an understanding of transportation and process as basic metaphors in the establishment of religious communities in America:

Transportation, particularly when it brought the Christian community of Europe into contact with the heathen community of the Americas, was seen as a form of communication with profoundly religious implications. The movement in space was an attempt to establish and extend the kingdom of God, to create the conditions under which godly understanding might be realized, to produce a heavenly though still terrestrial city. The moral meaning of transportation, then, was the establishment and extension of God’s kingdom on earth. The moral meaning of communication was the same.

The second of his proposed models of communication is that of ritual communication, also based in religion: “A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time;

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2 Carey, 13.
3 Ibid.
not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared belief.”

Noting the common roots of the words “communication,” “community,” and “communion,” he further describes the ritual view of communication: “It derives from a view of religion that downplays the role of the sermon, the instruction and admonition, in order to highlight the role of the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony. It sees the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action.”

Through an examination of these two views of communication, the transmission and the ritual views, Carey derives a definition of communication: “Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed.” This definition of communication, which I would contend is an essential definition to the exploration of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and ecclesiology, does not so much focus on the distinct identities of the sender and receiver in the process as upon the culture in which the co-communicators inhabit and interact.

My intention for the following pages is to describe the history and theories of communication studies with a focus on CMC and the work most relevant to CMC.

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4 Ibid., 15.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 19.
research. I will give a brief overview of the field of communication studies with the above definitions as a basis for my work. Looking at communication theories from their historical perspective, reviewing the several levels, genres, and contexts of communication theories, I hope to suggest the breadth of the field as well as to signify particular genres and theories that are important to any discussion of CMC, especially in relationship to the nature and mission of the church. Following this brief historical survey of communication studies, I will in some detail describe the particular theories and genres that have been most relevant to CMC studies. Finally, in the third section I will propose future directions for the intersection of communication studies and CMC, noting four particular genres and their implications for CMC research.

**Historical Development of Communication Studies**

Communication as a topic of interest and study has existed for centuries, going as far back as the Sophists in ancient Greek history and their use of rhetoric. Rhetoric is defined (in very contemporary terms) as “the systematic study and intentional practice of

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7 My focus will be on communication theories developed in relation to the use of texts, though they are clearly applied to images and visualizations when speaking of mass media. I want to acknowledge that there is a parallel area of study known as Visual Communication studies, but I will not address that area in this paper. For additional information about visual communication, I suggest Ken Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis and Keith Kenney, eds, *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005) and Carolyn Handa *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004).
effective symbolic expression.”\(^8\) Originally this was symbolic expression as found in oral and non-verbal practices, before being transposed into written forms. As literacy overtook orality as the measure of educated proficiency, the visual (reading the written word is, of course, a visual practice) replaced the auditory as the primary form of communication. Walter Ong calls this “secondary orality.” Ong notes this shift in many of his works, indicating that the spoken word, print, and the electronic abilities that allow all of them to converge, have transformed the interaction of word and text into an aural, oral, and visual experience that has reclaimed some of the primary orality lost through the development of earlier media technologies.\(^9\)

Beyond the western tradition of rhetorical studies, the field of communication studies did not evolve as a distinct field of study until the twentieth century. The study of communication in the US began to flourish following World War I and the study of propaganda. The emphasis in these early studies was primarily empirical, utilizing data collection and numerical measurements to determine the effectiveness of propaganda. The primary interest was in how propaganda had been utilized to advance the war effort


\(^9\) Ong describes the difference between primary and secondary orality: “I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, ‘primary orality’. It is ‘primary’ by contrast with the ‘secondary orality’ of present-day high-technology culture, in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.” (Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 11). See also *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).
in the US, but this interest was supplemented by a desire to consider marketing
techniques, public opinion research, and a surge in social psychology studies. Harold
Lasswell’s book *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* (1927) was foundational in
establishing media effects study at the center of Communication Studies, as was his
article “The Structure and Function of Communication in Society” in *The
Communication of Ideas* (1948). Media effects theory claims that individuals are
strongly affected by media messages because of the inherent power in the media’s ability
to shape public opinion. This thinking led to images of media influence as “the magic
bullet” or “the hypodermic needle” approach to communication. Though the
understanding of media effects has shifted since Lasswell’s work, it continues to be a
significant area of research in communication.

Three Models of Communication

The work on media effects was important, but it diminished in importance upon
the introduction of other models of communication that focused more directly on the
content of the message and its effects on receivers. Three major models of
communication process were developed and gained prominence. The first is the linear

10 Richard Campbell, Christopher R. Martin, and Bettina Fabos, *Media & Culture: An
Introduction to Mass Communication* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007), 515-516.

model, developed in 1949 by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. Working at MIT and Bell Laboratories, they were concerned with radio and telephone technologies and how information passed through various channels. In essence, this theory describes a message moving from sender to receiver, through a channel that will inevitably experience “noise:” influences and contextual cues that were not intended by the sender but will affect the reception of the message.

![Diagram of communication system](image)

Figure 6. Linear Model of Communication: Schematic diagram of a general communication system. Adapted from Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1949), 34.

Sometimes referred to as the “banking method,” when a single message is deposited in a particular place, this system has very little relational reference, nor does it acknowledge the problems of a multiplicity of messages being sent and received simultaneously.

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13 West & Turner, 10-11.
In 1954 Wilbur Schramm posited a second model of communication flow that gave more room for multiple roles within the relationship between the sender and the receiver, as well as a clearer statement of the role of feedback in communicative relationships. This model is the interactional model of communication.

![Interactional Model of Communication](image)

Figure 7. Interactional Model of Communication. Adapted from West and Turner, 11.

Rather than being viewed as a single, linear transaction (as was the transmission system), it can be conceptualized as a circle, with the message continually looping between sender and receiver, with the “noise,” context, and response (feedback) noted as essential components in the communication episode.

The interactional model was supplemented by a third model designed by Baranlund in 1970. In addition to the previously stated components found in the interactional model of sender, receiver, channel, noise, context and feedback, the transactional model adds the sense of simultaneity and cooperation between the sender and receiver, which builds a communicative moment with shared meaning.
Unlike the first two models, the transactional model recognizes the influence that multiple messages have upon one another.

Each of these models is still used in communication studies and contributes to the understanding of how communication occurs. They interact with the five genres of communication theory that have been identified within communication studies: the structural/functional, cognitive/behaviorist, interactionist, interpretive, and critical. Each of these genres is a loosely organized collection of processes and theories and many converge in their interests and intentions.

**Genres of Study**

The first genre is that of the structural/functional, and includes theories of Cybernetics, Semiotics, and Speech Act Theory. The general premise of this genre is that
both the structures and functions used in communication can be studied objectively and empirically noted and defined. This category includes those theories that are bound by rules and strict patterns of form and meaning, as can be found in system theories or linguistic theories. Fundamental to this genre is the idea that communication skills are independent from the context and the particularities of a communication episode, and can thereby be observed and studied without needing to consider the environment in which they occur, nor the impact (the associated feelings and meanings) they convey or provoke.

The second genre is cognitive/behaviorist theories. These theories focus on the individual and the cognitive response to messages, including behavioral responses. Theories in this genre include Message Production, Rhetoric, and Message Reception theories. Unfortunately, they do not describe how communication takes place or the relationship among participants.

Interactionist theories are the third genre and are so called because they view social life and communication as a process of interaction rather than as an objective fact. Dramatism, Narrative Theory, and the Social Construction of Reality theories represent the bulk of Interactionist thinking. This grouping focuses on the way in which communication structures society rather than on how structures determine communication. There is rarely an attempt within this genre to apply findings to other contexts or situations, preferring to locate the research and discovery of meaning in a particular, unique setting.
Interpretive theory, the fourth genre, is closely related to Interactionist theory but is primarily concerned with meaning and the way something is understood. Phenomenological studies and Hermeneutics are examples of theories within this genre. The texts being studied may include language use, artifacts, written texts, and experiences, and the research conducted on these texts is unabashedly subjective. The fifth and final genre is that of Critical Theory, frequently identified with Marxist critique, Feminism, and Cultural Studies. This genre focuses on a close reading of context with an eye to identifying injustices, inequities, and any oppressive aspects of communicative episodes and structures. There is an aspect of judgmental inquiry to critical studies, and it uses language as a starting point for the understanding of meaning and experience.\(^{14}\)

**Seven Contexts of Communication**

In addition to the three levels of communication and the five genres of communication theory, a third matrix has developed within communication studies: the seven contexts of communication: intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, organizational, public/rhetorical, mass, and intercultural. Not all communication scholars would include each of these in the matrix, but I include them here in order to offer the broadest possible picture of the breadth and complexity of communication studies. As the following table indicates, each context has an array of possible considerations.

\(^{14}\) Littlejohn, 12-16.
Table 12. Seven Contexts of Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Theoretical Concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal: communication with one’s self</td>
<td>Impression formation and decision making; symbols and meaning; observations and attributions; ego involvement and persuasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal: face-to-face communication</td>
<td>Relationship maintenance strategies; relational intimacy; relationship control; interpersonal attraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group: communication with a group of people</td>
<td>Gender and group leadership; group vulnerability; groups and stories; group decision making; task difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational: communication within and among large and extended environments</td>
<td>Organizational hierarchy and power; culture and organizational life; employee morale; opinions and worker satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public/Rhetorical: communication to a large audience</td>
<td>Communication apprehension; delivery effectiveness; speech and text criticism; ethical speechmaking; popular culture analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass: communication to large audiences through mediated forms</td>
<td>Use of media; affiliation and television programming; television and values; media and need fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural: communication between and among members of different cultures</td>
<td>Culture and rule-setting; culture and anxiety; hegemony; ethnocentrism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Each of these three categories – levels, genres, and contexts – is interactive and overlapping. Theories from each genre, for example, may be used to study one particular context. Thus, in studying CMC, pertinent research could be made most successfully using the transactional model of communication, but ranging through all of the contexts: intrapersonal (identify formation, anonymity), interpersonal (online relationships), and small group (chat rooms, blogs, online organizations) just to give a representation of the
situation. Theoretical genres ranging from the Cognitive/Behaviorist (including semiotics and audience/reception studies), Interactionist (Narrative Theory), Interpretive (Hermeneutics), and Critical Studies (cultural studies) would be particularly valuable in the study of CMC. Clearly, as communication studies expand, and new insights are achieved, the tendency is to have increased options rather than more exclusive and bounded studies.

With so many options in so many different contexts, it is difficult to find one particular genre or context for the study of CMC. Early CMC studies were often located with the context of Mass Communications, but as technologies have evolved and permitted intrapersonal and interpersonal activity on computers, the field has expanded. It is to the particular place of CMC within communication studies that I now turn.

**Computer Mediated Communication**

Generally speaking, CMC continues to be placed within the genre of Mass Communication study because of the number of people it affects and because of its broad, popular appeal. Mass Communication can be defined as “the process of designing and delivering cultural messages and stories to large and diverse audiences through media channels as old as the book and as new as the Internet.”\(^\text{15}\) Mass Communication is not, as this definition indicates, a new development: it involves any form of mass media, or

\(^\text{15}\) Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 11.
“channels of communication” that produce and distribute.¹⁶ These include the oral (e.g., political rallies and speeches, such as Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech), the written (letters, diaries, books), print (beginning with the printing press in the fifteenth century, when the written form was expanded and could be distributed to a large number of people, i.e. the Bible), the electronic (telegraph, telephone, radio, television), and the digital (computers, phones).¹⁷

In this characterization, CMC fits well into the genre of Mass Communication. However, technological developments have changed the relationship between user and machine, which has in turn altered the relationship of sender to receiver and the content and context of messages. For example, Mass Communication (based on the Uses and Gratification theory, which focuses on the receiver and considers the choices receivers make in order to meet their needs)¹⁸ is focused on messages being delivered from the “one” to the “many.” The “one” may be a particular power (individual, organization, political group) seeking to deliver a message to the largest possible audience, using channels ranging from radio to TV to newspapers to computers. Uses and Gratification theory made sense when communication really was from the one to the many, but with the increasing sophistication of software and technology, computers have transcended this limitation and can also function as the channel for one to one communication (email,

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.
¹⁷ Ibid., 10-11.
¹⁸ Littlejohn, 350-351.
Skype, instant messaging) and many to many communications (websites, Internet gaming, blogs). The context of CMC has expanded, thereby introducing new contextual models of communication running the entire gambit of possibilities. Another way to speak of this shift is to speak of media convergence, where upon a variety of machines and capabilities become interchangeable. By way of an example: at this time both the telephone and computer—both designed as one-to-one technologies—can be used interchangeable or complimentarily or independently of one another and they permit the entire range of communications: one to one, one to many, and many to many.

Perhaps the most significant impact this has on CMC is the convergence and expansion of the role of sender and receiver. Traditional models of communication assumed a sender and a receiver. As noted in the previous section, that concept evolved from a linear understanding to the transactional model in which the sender was also a receiver: both the sender and the receiver were engaged and active in the communication episodes. With CMC this model has expanded even further to permit anyone with the appropriate technologies to be a sender, a receiver, or both simultaneously. Another way to consider this is to use the language of marketing and commodification and speak of producer (the sender) and consumer (the receiver). The division between them was at

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20 Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 46.
one time fairly distinct. With the current capabilities of CMC, however, the producer and the consumer are merging to create a “prosumer”—someone who both produces and consumes.\(^ {21} \) Understandably, this has an immense impact on the concept of audience: who now is the audience, if everyone can be actively engaged in the production of the message?

Audience research is among the earliest types of communication studies, and comes to CMC with a long history of success and dissent. Questions that have persevered throughout audience research include who is the audience (is it “the masses” or a particular community), is the audience passive or active, what is the role of context in determining reception and meaning, and how great is the power of media to affect the community/masses? Each of these questions reflects a direction of communications study as well as signifying disagreement among scholars about the appropriate topics of research. The first question—who is the audience—is currently the site of great debate. The traditional view of “the masses” was one of malleability and anonymity, subject to (and needful of) control. Several factors have eroded the strength of this position, including higher education levels, increased access to information, the homogenization of society, globalization, and a decrease in the rigidity of social roles and boundaries.\(^ {22} \)


\(^ {22} \) Littlejohn, 335-336.
Directly related to the question of who the audience is, is the issue of the level of audience passivity and/or activity. The same factors that affected the determination of who is the audience also effects how the audience responds to media. As noted above, with the increased interactive capabilities of CMC and other mass media, the audience has assumed the role of prosumer, which is not at all passive but rather engaged and participatory. Frank Biocca indicates five characteristics of an active audience: selective, utilitarian, intentional, involved, and impervious to influence.\textsuperscript{23} This view of the audience is in direct opposition to the Media Effects Theory which was so foundational to Mass Communication studies in the early study of propaganda, public opinion, and marketing.

There are several theories that are still popular and have formed a public perception of mass communication. A quick review of these traditional communication theories will serve as back ground to more recent proposals for theorizing directed specifically at CMC. There are two broad categories: Media Effects and Audience Response.

Media Effects

Media Effects Theory began with the work of Lasswell (1948). He posed the research question: who says what in which channel to whom with what effect. This approach is functional, asking how it works and why it works. By focusing on the

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 337.
function of communication, however, this theory barely addresses context and meaning. Over time many variations of this theory have emerged, such as Limited Effects Theory, but they have not been widely adopted because of their ambiguous value.²⁴

The Two-Step Flow Theory was established by Lazarsfeld, aiming to measure the effects of media as influenced by interpersonal communication. An “opinion leader” in the community, or some strong vocal authoritative figure, has the power to sway opinion and to direct it in particular ways so that the effects of the media do not reside solely in the media themselves.

Everett Rogers developed the Diffusion of Information and Innovations Theory, which posits that ideas spread through a network of individuals within a particular context, or ideas may spread from person to person. This movement of opinion may be intentional or accidental; it may be rapid or move very slowly. But as with each successive theory noted so far, the circle of influence has grown past the original theory that the effects of media were unmatchable in their ability to influence and effect consumers.²⁵

The Spiral of Silence Theory, established by the work of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, states that if an opinion is perceived as popular it will be expressed; if it is perceived as unpopular it will be withheld. The assumptions accompanying this theory

²⁴ Ibid., 338.

²⁵ Ibid., 339-341; see also Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone, eds. The Handbook of New Media (London: Sage, 2006), 246.
are important. First, the consumers feel that they know what is popular and what is not. Secondly, they adjust their behavior accordingly, thereby altering their personal identity for the purposes of fitting in.26

Another media effects theory, created by George Gerbner, is called Cultivation Analysis. This theory is based on television research with the aim of predicting and explaining the long-term effects that television viewing has in forming perceptions and beliefs. For example, watching a lot of television, in essence, will shape your view of the world. We think we know things because we have seen or heard of them; first-hand experience is not the determining factor in establishing perceptions.27

Agenda Setting is the final theory to be addressed under the general category of media effects. It was first elaborated by Walter Lippman in relationship to journalists and the powerful effects their writing had on consumers. Lippman contended that media structured both the issues (that were conveyed to the consumer) and the response of the consumer (depending upon how the issue was presented, how often, and in what media). People, it was discovered, respond to the words and images they receive. This theory is closely linked with issues of rhetorical style and the abuse of persuasive power, in that it may create an imbalance of power.28

26 Ibid., 342-344.
27 West & Turner, 377.
28 Littlejohn, 345-348.
Audience Response

The second broad category of theories in Mass Communication studies is that of Audience Response. I will highlight only three of the most prominent theories. The first is the Uses and Gratification Theory. As mentioned earlier, this method focuses on the audience rather than the message. It proposes that the audience is an active consumer of media and has the power of selection. Because of this freedom, the audience will choose media that meet its needs. Inevitably, some needs will be met through non-media channels. But it is the power of audience needs and interests that govern this theory.29

The Expectancy Value Theory, developed by Philip Palmgren, focuses on the attitudes and beliefs of the audience as a determining factor in media use. Essentially, the attitude of the consumer toward a particular medium will be determined by that person’s beliefs and evaluations of the particular medium. These attitudes and beliefs may change with content. For example, watching television in order to view a news program may be deemed of value, whereas watching an afternoon soap opera might not be.30

Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur established the final audience response theory I will mention here: Dependency Theory. It has three main points. First, the consumer depends on media to meet certain needs. Secondly, the consumer will not necessarily depend on all media equally. And the final point is a question of what

29 Ibid., 349-350.
30 Ibid., 350-351.
determines your dependency, and two suggestions are offered: the consumer will depend on media that can satisfy the greatest number of needs, and the consumer’s social context will be influential. This point is important, because the researchers go on to say that depending on the stability of the social context, media use will increase or decrease. During times of social instability the need for media increases because the audience is seeking information and direction. Media use will decrease or be more consistent during stable social situations, when the audience is more content and comfortable.  

Each of these theories is located within the genre of Mass Communication, though each can be applied to other genres as well. The major emphasis in these theories is on the message rather than the audience, even though several of these theories are categorized under the heading of Audience Research. Feijter, following McQuail, notes that these theories fall into three distinct approaches: structural, behavioral, social-cultural: “The structural tradition focuses on audience measurement and typologies of audiences. The behavioral tradition employs a twofold orientation towards effects (stimulus response theories) and, in reply to this orientation, towards media use that includes its derived “gratifications and uses” theory. The social cultural tradition, so called cultural reception analysis or reception research, is about the social cultural use of media and the use of media related to everyday life.” From here Feijter moves to

31 Ibid., 351-352.
32 Feijter, 117.
Alasuutari’s division of audience research into three “generations:” reception research, audience ethnography, and the emerging third generation of constructivism. In McQuail’s model, reception research is equated primarily with media effects research and empirical data. The behavioral approach, while based on media effects research, moves into the consideration of “psychological factors, personal contacts, social environment, media structure, institutional and historical conditions, audience needs, motives for media choice and media use, socialization, questions of gender and ethnicity, lifestyle and everyday life.” In turn, the audience was determined to be less passive than originally assumed in Mass Communication studies. The three theories mentioned above are located in this behavioral category of research.

The third arena of audience research is the social-cultural, and it moves in an entirely different direction than the structural or behavioral approaches. This category is focused on the audience and is grounded in the cultural studies tradition (which, of course, draws upon many of the theories and trends already mentioned). It is here that we find Narrative Theory, Interpretive Community, and Speech Act Theory. Feijter describes the social-culture approach in this way:

The cultural reception approach – that bears a resemblance with semiotics – builds on Stuart Hall’s concept of encoding and decoding and grants the audience the possibility of reading media texts differently, according to personal experiences and culture. Instead of the behaviorist view, in which communication is seen as a process that involves effects, uses and gratifications, this analysis focuses on the interpretation that people derived from messages when they ‘co-

33 Ibid., 119.
determine’ content and effects. Reception, in this way, is not just a ‘technical thing’ as it was in the linear view of communication, but a ‘semiotic’ thing; people actively make meaning of the message they get.34

Returning to Alasuutari’s paradigm, these three theories all fall within the first generation of audience research. The second generation, which he calls audience ethnography, is framed by the role of the audience and critical theories. Quoting Morley, Feijter writes: “With respect to the changes from the first to the second generation of media studies, [he] notes a simultaneous shift from factual to fictional media forms; questions of knowledge to questions of pleasure; programme contents to media functions; conventional to identity politics; and matters of class to race, ethnicity, and gender.”35

She also notes, following Alasuutari, that there are three principal characteristics of second generation research:

- Media use and reception are part of social reality
- Research has to start from the audience ‘end’ i.e. everyday life to which the use of media is related, instead of taking reception in an interpretative community as point of departure
- A growing interest is shown in identity politics (gender, race, and ethnicity) and fictional programs.36

The third generation is one of media culture and media discourse. One way to describe this paradigm would be as a convergence of culture and media to such an extent that the media, the technologies, and the content can no longer be separated into discreet

34 Ibid., 123-124.
35 Ibid., 126.
36 Ibid.
categories but rather form a fluid environment of constant give and take. Some call this process “mediatization,” which is defined by Hjarvard as: “the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic. This process is characterized by a duality in that the media have become integrated into the operations of other social institutions, while they also have acquired the status of social institutions in their own right. As a consequence, social interaction—within the respective institutions, between institutions, and in society at large—takes place via media.”

A more detailed definition of mediatization and media logic is found in the same paper:

Mediatization is to be considered a double-sided process of high modernity in which the media on the one hand emerge as an independent institution with a logic of its own that other social institutions have to accommodate to. On the other hand, media simultaneously become an integrated part of other institutions like politics, work, family, and religion as more and more of these institutional activities are performed through both interactive and mass media. The logic of the media refers to the institutional and technological modus operandi of the media, including the ways in which media distribute material and symbolic resources and make use of formal and informal rules.

The significance of this third generation of audience research rests not in the abandonment of previous research models or theories, but rather in the convergence of theories, experience, and meanings that have not been previously acknowledged or valued:


38 Ibid., 105.
The novelty of the third generation of reception and audience ethnography studies is twofold. First, it recognizes the self-perception of the audience—the notion audience members have of themselves as being in the audience—as a discourse. And this discourse is one among others in media culture. Second, it broadens its frame of audience reception to the wide context of this media culture, or better media cultures that have different discourses son media and audiences. This means that it relates (e.g.) questions of meaning not only to decoding capabilities or to domestic viewing practices, but also to the role that media play in the daily life of media culture and its different discourses.\footnote{Feijter, 129.}

Having said this, much of the current CMC research continues to rely on the first and second generation of research, using models and categories that are familiar with the field of communication studies. For example, as noted on page twelve, CMC can be a platform for one to one, one to many, or many to many communications, indicating the broad range of communication options and possibilities. Throughout its history, because of these potential levels of communication, CMC has been referred to as impersonal, interpersonal, and hyper-personal. The impersonal position is not as frequently discussed now because of improved visual capabilities (i.e. webcams) and one to one communication does not need to reside solely in text based emails. But initially the use of email as a form of one to one communication was considered very impersonal. One reason it was deemed impersonal was because of the lack of non-verbal cues that are available to both sender and receiver.\footnote{Wood & Smith, 71.}
Three theories dominated this impression of CMC as impersonal. The first was the Cues-Filtered-Out theory, which measures the influence of a range of non-verbal communication. Because early email was only text-based, there were no supplemental cues to enhance or support the message. Social Presence theory was a second factor in early CMC studies and measured “the degree to which we as individuals perceive another as a real person and any interaction between the two of us as a relationship.” Research has indicated that people consider different media to deliver differing degrees of connection, and that some media will be more appropriate than others in certain situations. The third theory is Social Context Cues, which measures the indicators of appropriate behavior. Often these indicators are located in non-verbal communication and are therefore absent from CMC. Loss of inhibition, for example, was deemed to be one result of the lack of social context cues. It is interesting to note in this discussion of the impersonal, however, that what some considered impersonal (anonymity and lack of perceived relationship), others found liberating (anonymity and the chance to alter self-identity).

When CMC is considered as an interpersonal medium, research has focused on the reasons that relationships are able to transcend the impersonality of the computer interface and relationships are able to thrive. Based on the research of Lea and Spears,

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41 Ibid., 72.
42 Ibid., 71-74.
the SIDE model has been developed to explain the possibility of interpersonal relationships: Social Identification/Deindividuation. The SIDE model predicts that “people will set aside personal identity and adopt the appropriate social identity in order to find acceptance among others.”\textsuperscript{43} In an arena where there are limited social cues, a user will generally conform to the rules of the particular site in which she is engaged, valuing acceptance over personal identity (social identification). This is also referred to as deindividuation, in that a person opts for social identity over personal identity. The SIDE theory is most useful when used in a non-visual setting where complete anonymity is possible.\textsuperscript{44}

A hyper-personal view of CMC was developed by Walther, as a way to describe why some people thrive in a CMC environment whereas they are (or feel) deficient in a face to face relationship. He suggests four components to hyper-personal communication: sender, receiver, the channel, and feedback—all factors found in the traditional interactional and transactional models of communication. What makes this novel is the lack of non-verbal cues (which were generally assumed in early communication studies) and the opportunity to construct a self-identity free of physical characteristics. It has been observed that for some, CMC holds out a provocative


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 76-77.
promise: “The promise of greater control over the nonverbal elements of your self-presentation, of interacting with someone predisposed to reading a favorable impression of you, of more time to create more thoughtful and articulate messages, and of affirming feedback creates a situation that many cannot experience in real life.”45

The entire spectrum of CMC is a provocative promise because of its rapid rate of change and its unknown future. Despite its newness and promise, it faces many of the issues that media have frequently encountered in the past. For example, there is the tendency toward technological determinism, which ranges from a euphoric acceptance of technological advances, to those who view technology as inevitable and quietly acquiesce to its use, to those who rage against its permeation of culture. There are notable voices in opposition to mediatization, including Jacques Ellul, Albert Borgmann, and Clifford Christians.

Ellul, having identified the mediatization of culture decades before the term was inaugurated, feared that reality itself was being supplanted by technologically produced, and therefore false reality, which ultimately deprives humanity of truth and moral values:

Through the eruption of unlimited artificial images, we have reduced truth to the order of reality and banished the shy and fleeting expression of truth. Strangest of all, we are not dealing with the identification of truth with reality already found in science. Instead this “reality” is really fiction—literally simulated, depicted. This reality is falsified, but it constitutes the new visible human universe. It is a visible universe of proliferating images produced by all sorts of techniques. No longer are we surrounded by fields, woods, and rivers, but signs, signals, billboards, screens, labels, and trademarks: this is our universe. And when the

45 Ibid., 81.
screen shows us a living reality, such as people’s faces or other countries, this is still a fiction: it is a constructed and recombined reality. Modern people thus are deprived of reference to truth at the same time they lose their situation in lived reality. This situation is intolerable. It produces acute suffering and panic: a person cannot live deprived of truth and situated in fiction.46

He refers often to issues of privacy, security, political power, economic control, consumerism, commodification of all of culture, and of course Baudrillard’s concern about the hyperreal: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or as substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”47

Borgmann shares these concerns, but speaks of it differently. His concern is for the invisibility of the technological nature of our society and its impact on our relationship with the world around us. He fears we are sacrificing depth of being for the ready availability of commodities: “as we remake our personality and appearance to lend them the appeal of availability, we foreshorten our existence into an opaque, if glamorous, surface and replace the depth of tradition and rootedness of life by a concealed and intricate machinery of techniques and therapies.”48 He attributes this to what he identifies as the “device paradigm,” which is the essentially invisible interplay of


48 Albert Borgmann, Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 17; see also Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
commodity and technology.\textsuperscript{49} The effect of the device paradigm, he warns, is to lead us away from our human frailty and a knowledge of God: “A culture informed by the device paradigm is deeply inhospitable to grace and sacrament. The productive side of technology is an enterprise of conquering and controlling reality. The notions of human incompleteness and deficiency that signify a primal condition for the advent of grace are mere grist for technological mills.”\textsuperscript{50}

Christians’ concern reflects the issues raised by both Ellul and Borgmann. He fears that the instrumentalist nature of our mediatized culture is affecting our very being:

The mystique of machineness eats into our deepest being—our philosophy of life. The technological order is so pervasive, so overwhelming in its ubiquity, we can contain it no longer. Of course, an unending list of short-term crises demands our attention also, but our major long-term worry should be our attenuated philosophy of life. The instrumentalist worldview is invading our spirit and influencing the way we teach and learn and manage our social institutions. A calculus of averages and probabilities is replacing ends and the common good; the technological order is reconstituting the moral order in terms of technique.\textsuperscript{51}

By using the term instrumentalist to describe the convergence of media and culture, Christians is summarizing the commodification, competitiveness, and shallowness of a culture he feels is dominated by technological advances. In this he is fighting against those who consider technology to be neutral and without ethical implications: “valuing penetrates all technological activity, from the analytical framework used to understand

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 18.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 126.

technological uses, through the processes of design and fabrication, to the resulting tools and products. Although valuing is surely involved in the uses to which people put these technological objects, valuing saturates every phase prior to usage as well….Technologies do not exist in a presuppositionless vacuum. Instead, technology proceeds out of our whole human experience and is directed by our ultimate commitments.”52

Communication studies do offer a forum for these questions and concerns, providing theories and categories to help us understand and interact intelligently and consistently with CMC as well as other technologies. Communication studies has also provided a voice for those who want to make it clear that technology, like it or not, is not a neutral form of mediation (if, in fact, any form of mediation is neutral). Yet it is not inherently deterministic either. The individual’s perception of its role and quality in communicative endeavors is the final source of valuation.53

Closely allied with questions of determinism are those issues that address audience choice in methods of mediation. Early communication theorists, such as Shannon and Weaver, focused on a single message moving from sender to receiver with only one channel operating. The transactional model addressed this deficit, but the digital communication has multiplied the variety of channels and messages available.

52 Ibid., 38.
53 Wood & Smith, 81.
This growing pervasiveness leads to a fear of determinism, but there is no evidence that technology is taking over yet. First of all, CMC has ended the era of dualities in communicative actions. It is no longer a black and white, either/or experience to communicate. With CMC you can use text or images, voice or print, real or delayed time, communicate with one person or many, you can seek knowledge or be an information source to others, a reflective space, or perhaps the beginning of an interpretive community. CMC is a fluid source of mediation that has overcome aspects of dualistic thinking.\textsuperscript{54} The second sign that technology is not yet determining our future is that people still do not rely solely on technology for human interaction and communication. Research indicates that those who communicate through CMC generally communicate in other ways as well (telephone, face to face) and that multiple forms of mediation are found in most human experience.\textsuperscript{55}

A final concern to be raised at this time is the question of what happens when CMC is used instrumentally without reasoned consideration of its form or impact? Historically technological innovations have been adopted prior to being analyzed for their long-term implications, often because adoption of new technologies took a long time to permeate society (diffusion of innovations theory). The rate of introduction and adaptation in the twenty-first century, however, is of lightning speed. A word of caution

\textsuperscript{54} Feijter, 81.

\textsuperscript{55} Campbell, Martin & Fabos, 48.
is needed in the face of commodification of life and the compelling urge to consume the latest inventions. Communication studies do provide the tools for precautionary analysis and a deep reading of contemporary movements through its range of theories and historical understanding of media. But having the ability and exercising it are two different things.

Because CMC is a form of mediation that does not fit neatly into any one paradigm or theory, it has been difficult to analyze the best way to approach it. This is compounded by the rapid changes in CMC. Nonetheless, based on the genres, contexts and paradigms noted above as applied to CMC, I suggest that future analysis of CMC will be best served by three traditional genres of study: semiotics, interpretive theories, narrative theory, and a new theory: communication as dialogue. In the following section I will reiterate these genres and speak to their potential role in understanding and working with CMC, particularly in light of the increasing evidence of mediatization—or convergence—of media and culture.

**The Future of CMC and Communication Theory**

As previously mentioned, the pervasive use of media within western cultures has led to what is now being called mediatization. It can be defined as “…the process whereby communication refers to media and uses media so that media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and
culture as a whole.” The work of Hjarvard on mediatization utilizes the writings of Joshua Meyrowitz to flesh out this concept, using the metaphor of media as conduits, languages, and environments. Media as a conduit recalls the transportation model of communication, moving messages among senders and receivers. The focus of research upon “media as conduit” would be the message: what information is transmitted, how is it offered, and what topics are emphasized. The media are the producers of the message in the conduit metaphor and may or may not be associated with a religious institution, and because of this detachment messages are likely to have a very mixed content representing institutional religion, spirituality, pagan ritual, or popular images of the religious imagination.

Media as language refers to the format and construction of the message. For example, a news story about a new church start, a popular film with a religious theme, or a computer game like “World of Warcraft” all speak of religion but with very different assumptions, intentions, and outcomes. Media as language is intimately connected with popular culture and the array of religious representations found within it.

When looking at the media as environment, the focus is upon the impact of the media on communication and relationships. The media—as systems and as institutions—are very powerful and control much of the informational flow and format choices, which means that most human interaction and communication is filtered through the media.

This is a shift from previous generations when social institutions, family, school, or church were the primary filters. As their privilege and authority has decreased, the media has become the dominant filter. Meyrowitz refers to the media now as “the most important storyteller about society itself.”\footnote{Stig Hjarvard, “The Mediatization of Religion: A theory of the media as agents of religious change” in \textit{Northern Lights}, vol. 6 (2008), 12-13.}

Whether this represents an entanglement or a convergence of interests is difficult to assess, but this new way of looking at culture and media as inseparable suggests the need for a new way to study CMC. This may not require totally new theoretical constructs, but it will certainly demand an adjustment to existing genres. Based on prior considerations, I suggest that the three broad genres of Narrative, Interpretive, and Speech Act Theory are the most fruitful theories to explore and apply to CMC in the fluid context in which it operates.

\textbf{Narrative Theory}

Narrative theory “promotes the belief that humans are story-tellers and that values, emotions, and aesthetic considerations ground our beliefs and behaviors. In other words, we are more persuaded by a good story than a good argument.”\footnote{West & Turner, 346.} Walter Fisher, a major voice in the field of Narrative theory, considers his work to offer a paradigm rather than a theory because of the breadth and scope of narrative thinking: “All communication is
narrative. He argues that narrative is not a specific genre (stories as opposed to poems, for example), but rather it is a mode of social influence.”

His paradigm—which characterizes humans as storytellers who experience life in narrative form—stands in contrast to what he calls the “rational paradigm” which upholds logic and reason to be the primary categories of interpretation: “With narrative, Fisher suggests, we move away from an either/or dualism toward a more unified sense that embodies science, philosophy, story, myth, and logic. The Narrative Paradigm presents an alternative to the rational world paradigm without negating traditional rationality.”

Fisher’s proposal serves to lessen the dichotomy between reason and irrationality, which allows for a much broader array of interpretive categories to emerge and be used for both the content and construction of narrative not available in previous theories. In addition to this shift in thinking, there are other assumptions that undergird the Narrative Paradigm. One is that humans are rooted in stories: the universal role of stories in culture indicates a deep relationship between humans and narrative. Another assumption is that humans choose which narratives to attend to based on their meaning-making at a particular moment in time and place. A third assumption is that one’s context influences narrative choice: history, gender, culture, individual character, education, or any of a number of factors influences our choices. Whether or not the narrative is internally

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59 Ibid., 352.

60 Ibid., 347.
consistent and truthful is the important fourth assumption. The final assumption is that the stories we choose shape us and change us, interpreting our experience through a particular view of reality.61

The Narrative Paradigm involves five key points:

1. Narration: the verbal or non-verbal message, produced sequentially, to which listeners assign a meaning
2. Narrative Rationality: the means for judging the message
3. Coherence: the internal consistency of the story
4. Fidelity: the truthfulness, or reliability, of the story
5. Logic of Good Reasons: “a set of values that appeal to her or him and form warrants for accepting or rejecting the advice advanced by any form of narrative. This does not mean that any good reason is equal to any other; it simply means that whatever prompts a person to believe a narrative is bound to a value or a conception that is good.62

For many, Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm is simply too broad and general to be of use. For others it has permitted the expression of a variety of personal values, choices, and contexts that had not previously been afforded adequate attention or value.

Interpretive Theory

A second valuable genre which shifts the playing field towards the meaning-making role of the audience is Interpretive Theory, which can be defined as “the active process of assigning meaning to something you observe, like a text, an act, or a situation—any experience, really. Because a message or other act could mean a variety of things,

61 Ibid., 348-351.

62 Ibid., 354; see also pp. 351-355.
meaning cannot be ‘discovered.’ Interpretation, by definition, is an active, disciplined process of the mind, a creative act of searching for possible meanings.”

Phenomenology is one approach, which studies those objects and events being experienced. I will not deal with that aspect of Interpretive Theory, but rather consider the branch known as Hermeneutics, and in particular textual interpretation.

Hermeneutics can be applied to texts or society, and frequently it combines the two. The work of Stanley Fish is of particular interest in relationship to CMC because he focuses not on the meaning of the text itself (he claims there is no singular meaning) but upon the reader/audience. In literary studies this has come to be known as reader-response theory. This is not to say that the construction of meaning is a totally individual process. Fish acknowledges, and in fact requires, the assumption that individuals are a part of a group that constructs common meanings. He calls these groups “interpretive communities.”

Meaning, in Fish’s theory, is not stable or objective. It is not found in the message/text/artifact itself—which is a highly controversial concept. Meaning, or the culture of meaning, is located within the interpretive community—which can be a small or large group, even a national or global community. When applied to media studies in particular, it must be remembered that a person is usually a part of several different

63 Littlejohn, 199.

64 Ibid., 209.
interpretive communities simultaneously, and the same media can be interpreted differently by each community.

Thomas Lindlof has defined three necessary qualities of an interpretive community. The first is content, which is what encounters and engages the community in seeking meaning. It may be associated with a particular medium, but not necessarily. It must, however, include a particular meaning. For example, the reading of a Gospel would be an act of faithful interpretation for a believer in a Christian community, a good story to a student in a literature class, an enchanted tale to a young child, and total nonsense to an atheist. Though media content is shared in this example, there is no one interpretive community. The second quality is, therefore, interpretation. Content will be interpreted consistently within an interpretive community. The third point is social action. This is “shared sets of behaviors toward the media in question, including not only how the media content is consumed (when and where it is viewed or read) but also the ways it affects the conduct of the members of the community.”

Interpretive theories such as these require extensive ethnographic research, and can be assessed through either qualitative or quantitative methods. The same applies to cultural studies, which is a close relative of interpretive communities. Cultural studies focuses on shared identity, shared meaning, patterns, rules, values, and any of the relational interactions that make up a cultural group (including dissenting voices and

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Cultural studies is a category of communication studies that is still developing in the US context and includes a variety of social science theories and techniques as well as an array of communication genres, contexts, and theories. Its fluidity holds great promise for future CMC study in the context of mediatization, as well as in the interrelated contexts of media and culture.

Semiotics

Semiotics, contrary to cultural studies, has a long history in both the US and in Western Europe and includes a number of different threads. As the study of signs, objects, and meanings or associations, Charles Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, Umberto Eco, and many others have contributed to an extremely nuanced study of the relationship between these three categories. Because of its relationship to precise rules of speech and code manipulation, Semiotics is often placed in the genre of structuralism because of its alignment with established and firm rules and conventions in practices of coding and decoding. Because of the complicated nature of semiotic theory, I will highlight just two aspects of semiotics which point to the inherent possibilities they hold in relationship to CMC. The first is Speech Act theory and the second is Media Semiotics.

66 Ibid., 212-213.

67 For a good introduction to semiotics, see Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, Semiotics and Communication: Signs, Codes, Cultures (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993).
Speech Act theory comes to us via Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, J.L. Austin’s work on speech acts, and John Searle’s continued innovations. Simply put, Speech Acts are actions we perform when speaking. Words have both meaning and action, according to this theory. A Speech Act may be a word, sentence, phrase—and I contend a website—as long as it conforms to the rules needed to accomplish the intention of the words.\(^6^8\)

There are four steps to the Speech Act process. First is the utterance act, which is the simple, basic statement of the word itself. The second is the propositional act, which the idea that you believe what you have just uttered. The third step is the illocutionary act, in which your utterance contains intention. The fourth and final step is the perlocutionary act, which describes the actual effect your utterance has on the listener; it is the act that anticipates a particular response from the listener. When these steps are combined with the constitutive rules of language (the agreed upon sequence, patterns, and meanings that make something work), a Speech Act occurs.\(^6^9\)

The focus of Speech Act theory—and the reason it is important to the further study of CMC—is in its analysis of what the speaker and listener intend in their exchange. Whereas the interpretive community focuses on the receiver and meaning-making, Speech Act theory affords a methodology aimed at discerning intended meanings.

\(^{6^8}\) Littlejohn, 86.

\(^{6^9}\) Ibid., 86-87.
Speech Act theory is not functional in a system where language rules are not shared and where the words/signs being used are not shared. This would not be an effective theory to apply to a many-to-many communication, but would work in a situation where, for example, a website was seeking to communicate a particular message to users or in interpersonal communication through email or blogging. Combined with theories designed to consider audience needs and interests, an effective means to construct messages could be created.

Media Semiotics is the second area of general semiotic study I would like to introduce as a potential force in future CMC research. Media Semiotics is the branch of semiotics that applies the study of the creation of signs, as well as the way the audience understands them. The focus is on the message and the many ways a message can be interpreted. Fry and Fry have developed a process to study media semiotics, with three elements to take into account. First, media messages can provoke multiple meanings. Secondly, messages get their meanings from the context and experiences of the receiver—and there may be multiple meanings evoked within one receiver, including the emotional response, a logical response, or an associational response. The third element to consider is that the meaning of the message is effected by events and meanings beyond the

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70 Ibid., 86-87.
71 Ibid., 330.
meaning itself.\textsuperscript{72} The interplay here between producer, receiver, and context will lend itself to CMC research as media and culture continue to converge.

The Art of Dialogue

A final communicative possibility that I would suggest has a promising future in the interaction of religion and CMC research is one that grew out of theological and philosophical concerns more than communicative concerns, giving it a focus that is more relational and meaning-oriented than many communication theories. Feijter, who has written on this topic extensively, calls it the “art of dialogue.” Drawing upon Martin Buber, she describes dialogue in such a way that I will quote her extensively to capture her voice:

the need for dialogue is fundamental to identity, social life and humanity for Buber. It is \textit{Thou} which makes me to an \textit{I}, a person able to related to the other in connected solidarity, and therefore related to the Eternal. Dialogue, to him, is being a living mutual relation with another. \textit{Genuine dialogue}, therefore, is not identical to conversation or debate, as he explains in \textit{Between Man and Man} (1947). Neither is it a privilege for ‘spiritual’ people, as some kind of spiritual luxury, or an intellectual activity like dialectic or discourse (argue). The aim of the debate is to make a direct hit. The one spoken to is not regarded present as a person. In a conversation (a chat or a talk) the aim is not communication or connection, nor to learn from or influence someone, but confirming one’s own self reliance.

Genuine dialogue is related to genuine community by Buber, which is neither individualism, nor collectivism. ‘The individual is a fact of existence in so far as he steps into a living relation with outer individuals. The aggregate is a fact of existence in so far as it is built up of living units of relation. The fundamental fact of human existence is man with man (…) It is rooted in one being turning to another as another, as this particular other being, in order to communicate with it in

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 332.
a sphere which is common to them but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each (...) This is the sphere of ‘between.’

Dialogical communication, for Feijter, is that space between two subjects, a space filled with respect and mutuality rather than being filled with targeting others, debate, coercion, or commodification. It requires a public space accessible to everyone, a high level of ethical responsibility, and a commitment to truth-telling. Feijter proposes this theory of communication as a form appropriate to a religious context in the media sphere.

The art of dialogue is perhaps the clearest representative of what I consider to be necessary in the study of CMC in light of ecclesiology and the religious sphere. There must be a conversation based in truth-telling, mutuality, and shared stories and meaning, and a desire to build and maintain community. I previously noted the definition of mediatization (a process I consider to be underway) as “the process whereby communication refers to media and uses media so that media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole.” I began this chapter with the mention of John Carey’s definition of communication as “Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed,” which he developed out a concept of ritual communication focused on the development and maintenance of community. Together these definitions offer, I believe, a web of possibilities that acknowledge the power, 

73 Feijter, 267.

74 Ibid., 268-280.
presence, and pervasiveness of technology with the prospect of utilizing this reality into a communicative force for maintaining community. Combined with the theories identified in this concluding section of the chapter, I contend that communication theory can play a major role in developing meaningful and ecclesiologically sound mediated churches. It is to this possibility that I turn in the next chapter.
CHAPTER SIX
THE CORRELATION OF COMMUNICATION THEORY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.¹

Mediatization, the idea that media use and the construction of social life, identity, and communication have merged, is perhaps the single most compelling reason to pursue a correlation of communication theory and ecclesiology. As mediatization progresses, there will cease to be clear demarcations between the use of technology for communication and use of technology to participate in other aspects of life. The message, the meaning, the producer, the consumer, and the media itself converge and meaning is made in the process of use and not at any single point in the relationship of these strands of mediatization. Ecclesiology and communication theory will therefore be intertwined even as media and church are joined together in new ways.

My task in this chapter is to elaborate on the correlation between the disciplines of communication and ecclesiology. Following a brief summary of the communication theories I have suggested as most relevant to this study (Narrative Theory, Interpretive Community Theory, and Speech Act Theory), I will identify three broad categories of theology and ecclesiology that can be correlated to these communication theories. In

order to establish the benefit of correlating communication theories and theological trends, I apply them to the four theological themes identified in Chapter Four—authority, community, mediation, and embodiment—which are so vital to the consideration of cyber-ecclesiology. In conclusion, I propose using a hermeneutical paradigm developed by Heidi Campbell—the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology—which integrates communication theory and theology as a way to reflect on ecclesial identity, media use, and communicative acts as a part of the ongoing evaluative process between the church and CMC.

My choice of communication theories and theological correlations is but a suggestion of the possible interactions of these two disciplines. My intention is to highlight possibilities and not to claim a definitive solution to the question of the ecclesiological viability of the online church. In fact, my selection of these particular communication theories and theologians in no way indicates their support of the cyber-church. Instead, I see the convergence of these two disciplines as suggesting future paths of research and study.

**Communication Theories**

With the intention of correlating communication theories with theological positions, I want to briefly reiterate the salient characteristics of the communication theories introduced in the last chapter, which I have proposed as potential partners in dialogue.
with ecclesiology. The three theories I suggest as most applicable are Narrative Theory, Interpretive Community Theory, and Speech Act Theory.²

Narrative Theory

Narrative Theory in communication studies is a forceful attempt to move away from western culture’s dependence upon rationality and to move toward a “narrative” logic. A narrative logic is one that incorporates more faculties and senses than the cognitively based logic of rationality. It also values emotions, sensation, and imagination.³ Because of the breadth and depth of factors involved in narrative forms of communication, multiple dimensions of human experience are recognized as a part of communication rather than restricting communication to reason alone. Narrative logic is more likely to reflect the whole person while acknowledging the context and culture that shapes the individual’s experience. For these reasons, Fisher considers narrative as a “mode of social influence” rather than a particular literary genre.⁴

While allowing for the power of cultural interpretation, Narrative Theory also promotes the role of each individual in its interpretation. Narrative logic, for Fisher, does not depend on reason alone, and therefore allows for the voices of those not trained in

² For a more complete description of these theories, see pages 237-244 in the previous chapter.


formal logic and rhetorical skills to evaluate and determine narrative meaning. This is possible because narrative logic depends upon values and meaning rather than “truth” or facts. As noted in the previous chapter, Narrative Theory operates on four principles: narrative rationality, coherence, fidelity, and the logic of good reason. The fourth principle, the logic of good reason, is the clearest example of the difference between the logic of reason and narrative logic:

**Table 13. Logic of Reason and Logic of Good Reason**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logic of Reason</th>
<th>Logic of Good Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are the statements that claim to be factual in the narrative really factual?</td>
<td>What are the implicit and explicit values contained in the narrative?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have any relevant facts been omitted from the narrative or distorted in its telling?</td>
<td>Are the values appropriate to the decision that is relevant to the narrative?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the patterns of reasoning that exist in the narrative?</td>
<td>What would be the effects of adhering to the values embedded in the narrative?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How relevant are the arguments in the story to any decision the listener may make?</td>
<td>Are the values confirmed or validated in lived experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well does the narrative address the important and significant issues of this case?</td>
<td>Are the values of the narrative the basis for ideal human conduct?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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5 Ibid., 350; This may also be an opening by which to consider Gerrish’s emphasis on the Reformed habitus and its attention to the “practical” aspects of the Reformed Tradition. Gerrish speaks of piety “Tradition in the Modern World: The Reformed habit of Mind,” in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics Traditions*, eds. David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999, 17-19), and Volf and Bass speak of practices as ways to express values and meaning without necessitating an academic relationship to theology (Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practical Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Press, 2002)).

6 Ibid., 352-354; see pages 238-239 in the previous chapter for more detail.
Fisher proposes these two sets of questions as a way to shift the analysis of a situation away from being primarily a cognitive proposition to being a dimension of lived experience, from a position of detachment and neutrality to a position of engagement with values and meaning.\(^7\)

In addition to its recognition of values and meaning, Narrative Theory does not assume a stability of content beyond the particular, contextual, interpretative experience. A good narrative invites participation and evaluation because it engages the whole person. Each individual who encounters the narrative potentially experiences it differently and draws different conclusions about its meaning and relevance. For some this means instability and relativism. Yet rather than being a critique of Narrative Theory, the fact that outcomes and relationships engendered by the narrative are fluid and dynamic indicates the “multiple logics” at work in the interpretive community.\(^8\) There is not a right or a wrong reading of narrative, but rather a dialectical tension between the hearer/reader and the narrative that is enacted within the hearer/reader’s experience, context, and interaction with the narrative.

**Interpretive Communities**

While Narrative Theory promotes value and meaning within the particular story, text, or worldview, the second communication theory to be considered—Interpretive

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\(^7\) Ibid., 354-355.

\(^8\) Ibid., 356.
Community Theory—describes a method of assigning meaning to particular content.  

Interpretive Community Theory is a concept found in many areas of the humanities and social sciences, and it derives from the work of critical and cultural studies. It is a hermeneutical process for interpreting a text, situation, or experience. I am interested in utilizing both of the traditional forms of this hermeneutical process. The first form is that of critical social theory, which emphasizes a self-reflective and transformative approach to the interpretive process. The second traditional form is literary critical theory which focuses more on explanation and interpretation as hermeneutical goals. Both of these aspects of hermeneutics impacts the idea of Interpretive Communities and are relevant to this dissertation.

The concept of Interpretive Communities grew out of, in part, from the work of Stanley Fish in the field of literary criticism. Fish, among others, emphasized the need to seriously consider the text in order to understand it. A text is not considered to be a transparent or self-evident creation. He also emphasized the role of the interpreter as meaning-maker, rather than placing the meaning exclusively within the text. In addition, Interpretive Community Theory acknowledges the importance of context as a critical component of understanding the text. Unlike many other communication theories, the concept of Interpretive Communities does not consider the message itself to be the bearer of meaning. Instead, the reader provides the meaning. In describing Fish’s reader-response theory—which is a prominent aspect of the concept of Interpretive Communities—it has been said that: “The proper question is not, ‘What does a text
mean?’ but ‘What does a text do?’ 9 What sort of impact does a text have on the reader, and how does it fit into the context and worldview of the reader?

Of course, Interpretive Communities and hermeneutics in general, offer a way to analyze the text (the text being something written, visual, auditory, or situational). Hermeneutics provides a way to seek meaning and understanding of something that is unfamiliar and oblique. This is often the case when the text being studied is from a different time, uses a different set of references than is customary, or is from a different culture. The “hermeneutic circle” is one way to approach the text: look at the specifics of the text at hand; relate it to what is already known; look for unknown or unexpected items in the text; reconsider the initial reading of the text; modify the understanding of the text as needed; begin the process anew.10

There are many types of hermeneutical circles within the discipline of theology, and they often represent differing agendas. While hermeneutics is an ancient practice and is found across disciplines, it is the idea of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that is of importance in this dissertation. A hermeneutics of suspicion is that which opts for a self-reflective approach—and often a political and liberationist perspective—as the interpreter challenges the text to speak anew. Paul Ricoeur was an early voice in hermeneutics of suspicion: “Paul Ricoeur has said that all hermeneutics involves suspicion; that is, the

9 Littlejohn, 209.

10 Ibid., 207.
text presents us with a challenge to believe that the true meaning of the text emerges only through interpretation. Interpretation is occasioned by a gap between the real meaning of the text and its apparent meaning, and in the act of interpretation suspicion plays a pivotal role.\textsuperscript{11} Juan Luis Segundo, a student of Ricoeur, elaborated on this hermeneutic of suspicion with Marxist and theological analysis, addressing the oppressive theological interpretations and unjust social practices in Latin America. He describes his hermeneutical circle as: “the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and social.\textsuperscript{12}

Letty Russell also uses a hermeneutical circle, and while her approach is also liberationist, it is specifically feminist. Russell speaks of a spiral rather than a circle in describing the hermeneutical process: “a spiral method of action and reflection that makes connections between context and tradition as a means of theological table talk….It draws on our own social and ecclesial context and experience but subjects it to critical analysis and connects it to the tradition and to actions with others who are struggling for

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\textsuperscript{12} Juan Luis Segundo, \textit{Liberation of Theology}, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 8. Segundo’s hermeneutic circle takes four turns: \textit{Firstly} there is our way of experiencing reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion. \textit{Secondly} there is the application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. \textit{Thirdly} there comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, that is, to the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the bible has not taken important pieces of data into account. \textit{Fourthly} we have our new hermeneutic, that is, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e., Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal.” (Ibid., 9); for additional interpretation of Segundo’s background and method see Bryan P. Stone’s \textit{Effective Faith: A Critical Study of the Christology of Juan Luis Segundo}, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994.
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life." In her final book, *Just Hospitality*, Russell speaks of a “hermeneutic of commitment.” Having initially, in her earlier works, advocated a hermeneutic of suspicion, she expanded her hermeneutical process to look beyond suspicion to the trust and commitment within an ecclesial community: “A hermeneutic of suspicion is important, but it is not enough...we must also approach the text with a hermeneutic of commitment. This commitment means believing that God might provide a safe space in the text that speaks to us in some way, if only by telling us that this is a text in which the message is *thou shalt not!* do what it describes.”

Ultimately, when hermeneutical endeavors are conducted under the rubrics of both suspicion and commitment, hermeneutics takes seriously the symbolic nature of communication and its interaction with a particular time, place, and people and the subsequent need for interpretation in new situations. It is this sense of hermeneutics which makes Fish’s concept of Interpretive Communities so important to the evaluative process I am proposing. Focusing on the reader as the source of meaning rather than

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13 Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 30. Russell describes several points to her theory: “This style of theologizing in a continuing spiral of engagement and reflection begins with *commitment* to the task of raising up signs of God’s new household with those who are struggling for justice and full humanity. It continues by *sharing experiences* of commitment and struggle in a concrete context of engagement. Third, the theological spiral leads to a *critical analysis* of the context of the experiences, seeking to understand the social and historical factors that affect the community of struggle. Out of this commitment to action in solidarity with the marginalized, and out of sharing of experiences and social analysis, arise *questions about biblical and church tradition* that help us gain new insight into the meaning of the gospel as good news for the oppressed and marginalized. This new understanding of tradition flows from and leads to *action, celebration, and further reflection* in the continuing theological spiral.” (Ibid., 30-31).

upon the text, Fish realized that individuals do not interpret in isolation. Everyone is a part of a community. The importance of this theory resides in its acknowledgement of the community, or audience, as meaning-maker and the need to speak to that community directly and in appropriate idiom in order to be understood. In constructing a message or a text, the producer must identify the interpretive community and its shared realities in order to create an understandable and meaningful message. If this is not done successfully, the message may be variously ignored or misinterpreted.

The concept of Interpretive Communities as a hermeneutical tool has been criticized by critical theorists as being too insular and self-contained, not allowing for ideas and understandings which reside outside of the community/individual to surface and impact the interpretive process. Because the concept of Interpretive Communities does not necessarily lead toward radical critique and change, it is considered to be traditional and positivistic without offering any transformative possibilities. In addition, adherents of structuralism and pragmatic theories consider the concept of Interpretive Communities to be too subjective and therefore not able to be generalized into a workable theory. Yet subjectivity is precisely the point of Fish’s theory: the symbols used in constructing a message have no stable meaning of their own. Only as the message interacts with a particular community or reader will meaning be made—and then only for that particular community in that time and place.
Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory is the third communication theory I propose as being particularly relevant to the interaction of CMC and ecclesiology. Speech Act Theory is about the power of words and the intentions behind the words. As noted previously, this theory is not particularly helpful outside of a particular community with shared symbolic referents and assigned meanings. It also demands a shared set of rules for structure, as well as a cultural understanding of the possible nuance in tone and content. Generally a speech act is a statement of intent and is explicit in its content, though this is not always the case. The truth or logic of the speech act is not a strong concern in this theory. Rather, the focus is on the intention of the speech act.\textsuperscript{15}

With the focus on intention, Speech Act Theory brings to this correlational process a focus on the interaction between the speaker and the hearer within the context of the exchange. It is a call for thoughtful, well constructed messages that can be meaningful and productive. It also emphasizes the need to identify the audience/community because speech acts are not productive if the rules and sequences of the speech act are not understood by the receiver. Finally, Speech Act Theory also suggests a power and efficacy inherent in verbal exchanges that may have a significant impact on the relationship between ecclesiology and CMC.

The Correlation to Theology and Ecclesiology

The interface of these communication theories with ecclesiological and theological issues is remarkable. Even the language used to describe the theological categories is similar. The three theological positions I suggest as considerations are Narrative Theology, Communities of Practice, and the semiotic approach found in

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 87.
Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach and Vanhoozer’s canonical-linguistic approach with its focus on theo-drama. Narrative Theory and Narrative Theology share many core concerns, just as do Interpretive Communities and the idea of communities of practice. Speech Act Theory is related to Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic theory as well as to the work of post-liberal and missional theologians.\textsuperscript{16}

**Narrative Theology**

Narrative Theology upholds the same promise as Narrative Theory does within communication studies—that humans are story-tellers and story-dwellers. Our worldviews and lived experience are shaped by the stories we hear. It is through stories that we gain a sense of place, belonging, history, values, and self-identity. It is through stories that we become a people with a past and a future. This is expressed in different ways by different theologians. Lindbeck writes: “It is the text, so to speak, which absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.”\textsuperscript{17} For Lindbeck, the story found in Scripture is what shapes the Christian person: “For those who are steeped in [the texts], no world is

\textsuperscript{16} In the following pages I will refer primarily to the work of Vanhoozer and Balthasar, but there are others who claim semiotics as an important feature in contextualizing the text. Robert J. Schreiter refers to the “semiotic study of culture” and outlines a method to analyze culture using semiotic themes and process in *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 49-74. Vanhoozer notes that Karl Barth also used language reminiscent of semiotic concerns in describing the self-communication of God: “God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself. If we really want to understand revelation in terms of its subject, i.e., God, then the first thing we have to realize is that this subject, God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect.” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Edition, 13 volumes, eds. Geoffrey Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-1975) I.2.8 p. 296.

more real than the ones they create. A scriptural world is thus able to absorb the
universe. It supplies the interpretive framework within which believers seek to live their
lives and understand reality. This happens quite apart from formal theories."\(^{18}\) It is also
the basis of interpreting the world and lived experience: “The primary focus is not on
God’s being in itself, for that is not what the text is about, but on how life is to be lived
and reality construed in the light of God’s character as an agent as this is depicted in the
stories of Israel and Jesus.”\(^{19}\)

Hauerwas describes the importance of narrative in forming the Christian
character: “Narrative provides the conceptual means to suggest how the stories of Israel
and Jesus are a “morality” for the formation of Christian community and character.”\(^{20}\)
His focus on narrative, in this instance, is related to living faithfully in the midst of
“competing narratives”:

Our concern must be to understand better how to live appropriate to the God
whom we find in the narratives of Israel and Jesus, and how these stories help
provide the means for recognizing and critically appropriating other stories that
claim our lives. For it is true that we always find ourselves enmeshed in many
histories – of our families, of Texas, America, European civilization, and so on –
each of which is constituted by many interrelated and confusing story lines. The
moral task consists in acquiring the skills, i.e., the character, which enables us to
negotiate these many kinds and levels of narrative in a truthful manner.\(^{21}\)

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 117.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{20}\) Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: towards a constructive Christian social ethic*

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 96.
Both Lindbeck and Hauerwas are concerned to know the narrative on its own terms, rather than trying to merging it with local idioms and cultural norms. They are not opposed to using a variety of analytical tools to interpret the narrative, but the goal is not to re-state it in terms of some other, or allegedly more foundational narrative, but rather to understand its meaning and formative power as it speaks for itself. Missiologist Craig van Gelder concurs and suggests a structure for encountering the narrative faithfully: “In carrying out a narrative approach, our task is threefold: (1) to reenter the biblical story on its own terms, (2) to listen to this story through the historic interpretation of the Christian tradition, and (3) to let this story and reinterpretation shape or reshape our own story.”

Others take narrative theology in a slightly different direction by speaking of theo-drama (Balthasar) or theology as drama (Vanhoozer). Both theologians envision theo-drama as the lived experience of salvation history, known to us through the narrative of Scripture. Balthasar describes his dramatic theory as “theo-praxy.” As we participate in God’s dramatic story (dramatic because always dynamic), and thereby interpret and understand it: “[Interpreting revelation] can only be done by the absolute commitment found in that drama into which the one and only God sets each of us to play

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our unique part. Death turns into life, and this is something that also takes place in our hearts so that, drawn into the action, they can look toward that center in which all things are transformed. But we have been appointed to play our part, and thus we share responsibility for our own understanding and expression of it.”

Vanhoozer also views revelation as a drama: “The drama of doctrine is about refining the dross of textual knowledge into the gold of Christian wisdom by putting one’s understanding of the Scriptures into practice....The proper end of the drama of doctrine is wisdom: lived knowledge, a performance of truth”. While the concept of theo-drama gives the focus on practice a new dimension by describing it as a participatory moment in God’s self-revelation, it does not depart from the promises of narrative theology which situates Christian life within the narrative and the community firmly grounded within the narrative.

Each of the theologians just mentioned speak in terms of community: narrative theology is not an individual event. It is grounded in community just as Christian narrative is grounded in the history of God’s chosen people. Though each contemporary community may engage the narrative differently, wrestling with the intersection of story and lived experience remains a communal endeavor. It is the lived experience of the community that fosters meaning and fidelity to the narrative within the context of

\[\text{24 Ibid., 16-17.}\]

practices that support and reflect the narrative. What communication theory refers to as Interpretive Communities are Communities of Practice in theology and ecclesiology: the place where narrative is enacted, embodied, and evaluated for its faithfulness.

Communities of Practice

Hauerwas speaks eloquently of the essential relationship of story, community, and practice:

If we are to understand how Christian convictions help us to form our lives truthfully the narrative nature of our lives must be recognized. To stress the significance of narrative at the very least helps remind us that the documents crucial to the life of the Christian community take the form of a narrative. Of course some of the material in those documents is not immediately narrative in form, but such material could not exist without the narratives and indeed draws its intelligibility from them. To insist on the significance of narrative for theological reflection is not, however, just to make a point about the form of biblical resources, but involves claims about the nature of God, the self, and the nature of the world. We are “storied people” because the God that sustains us is a “storied God,” whom we come to know only by having our character formed appropriate to God’s character.26

The character of the narrative is known as it is lived: “we only learn what that story entails as it is lived and lives through the lives others.”27 Lindbeck also emphasizes the necessity of practices: “to become religious—no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent—is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its

26 Hauerwas, 90-91.
27 Ibid., 92.
inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated. The primary knowledge is not about the religion, nor that the religion teaches such and such, but rather how to be religious in such and such ways.”

Continuing with the framework of theo-drama, Vanhoozer actually defines the church as a “community of performance:” “The redemptive work of Christ is complete; there is nothing that the church can add to it, though it points to and participates in it through praise, proclamation, and, as we shall see, performance. The church is a mimēsis of the gospel, the creative and celebratory imitation of a company of players, a community of joyful corporate witness….the church is the company of the gospel, whose nature and task alike pertain to performing the word in the power of the Spirit.”

The missional church movement is one example of ecclesial communities committed to the intersection of faith and practice, embodying the community of performance Vanhoozer refers to. It is also a movement willing to express its reliance on the work of the Spirit in determining its course and function:

Missional communities are called to represent the compassion, justice, and peace of the reign of God. The distinctive characteristic of such communities is that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains them. Their identity (who they are), their character (how they are), their motivation (why they are), and their vocation (what they do) are theological, and thus missional. That is, they are not formed solely by human intentions and efforts, individual or collective, but instead by God’s empowering presence….Through this power of the Holy Spirit a “people sent” are

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28 Lindbeck., 35.

29 Vanhoozer, 401. Emphasis in the original.
cultivated through the practices by which they are formed, trained, equipped, and motivated as missional communities.\textsuperscript{30} Within this movement there is a strong emphasis on Scripture, context, message, and practice. It is missional because it is a sending forth of people and practices beyond the traditional boundaries of a physical parish or local community. The missional movement includes a variety of church models, including house churches and other small group settings. Authority is not centralized, and growth is not a primary objective. In the missional church the intention is to be faithful to the story and to be practicing the Gospel. The result is a highly embodied faith in local contexts: “We must embody our visions and our values in such a way that people can “see” the vision in and through our existence.”\textsuperscript{31}

Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory recalls the work of Lindbeck and Vanhoozer. Both theologians employ the language of Speech Act Theory, but in very different manners. Lindbeck has proposed what he calls the “cultural-linguistic” approach to religion: “emphasis is placed on those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures (insofar as these are


\textsuperscript{31} Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, \textit{The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21\textsuperscript{st}-Century Church} (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 156.
understood semiotically as reality and value systems—that is, as idioms for the constructing of reality and the living of life). The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.”

He compares religion to the language concept of an “idiom:” “it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.”

Both culture and language are used to describe how people are shaped and directed by the idiom they employ. Rule theory, which Lindbeck applies to doctrines, is that part of Semiotics and Speech Act Theory that applies strict rules of structure and organization to the communicative act. Rules are what help us to know the difference between a promise and a command, for example. Lindbeck suggests that doctrines play a similar role in his cultural-linguistic approach, serving as guidelines with invariant meanings to help interpret the idiom being used.

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32 Lindbeck, 17-18.

33 Ibid., 33.
Vanhoozer uses Speech Act Theory in a much more explicit and detailed manner while writing in opposition to Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach. Vanhoozer suggests, in place of the cultural-linguistic, a canonical-linguistic approach, which he feels holds the biblical canon at its center rather than the cultural center Lindbeck adopts. Vanhoozer writes that: “Canonical-linguistic theology attends both to the drama in the text—what God is doing in the world through Christ—and to the drama that continues in the church as God uses Scripture to address, edify, and confront its readers.”

The relationship of the canonical-linguistic approach and Speech Act Theory is made explicit in Vanhoozer’s discussion of what he terms “God’s communicative action,” and refers to “Triune Speech Acts:” “the Father initiates communication; the Son is the content of the communication; the Spirit is the efficacy of the communication. The triune God is the paradigmatic communicative agent: only God can communicate so as always to accomplish his purpose (Isa. 55:11).” In God, the saying and doing of Speech Act Theory becomes one. God the Father produces the words (the locutions), the Son is the promise as well as the word-acts (the illocutions), and the effect (the

34 Vanhoozer, 16.
35 Ibid., 17.
36 Ibid., 63.
37 Ibid., 65.
perlocution) is administered by the Holy Spirit. The result is a deeply canonical relationship with God:

For what God is doing in Scripture—particularly when we attend to the canonical context—is offering a theologically thick description of Jesus Christ. It is precisely by responding to the various illocutions in Scripture—by believing its assertions, by trusting its promises, by obeying its commands, by singing its songs—that we become “thickly,” which is to say covenantally, related to Christ. Indeed, in the triune economy of communicative action, we cannot have the intended perlocutionary effect—union with Christ and thus salvation—apart from the Spirit’s ministry of Scripture’s illocutionary acts or the preaching that extends them.

Vanhoozer’s proposal, (along with Lindbeck’s) highlights the importance of language and its rules in shaping human understanding and behavior within the interpretive community’s understanding of the narrative. Not only does it indicate the necessity of knowing a language thoroughly: it also emphasizes the communal nature of learning, knowing, and interpreting. Shared meaning and the rules of engagement are essential tools for participation and comprehension. Just as in the other communication theories reviewed, Speech Act Theory, combined with theology, points to the need for thoughtful message construction because of the potential power and force of the words being used and the lives being lived.

Application to the Four Theological Issues: Authority, Community, Mediation, and Embodiment

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38 Ibid., 67.

39 Ibid., 68. Emphasis in the original.
One of the chief points of convergence between contemporary communication theory and theology is the importance of the audience—or community—and its participatory nature in the interpretation and practice of theology.\(^{40}\) While the audience has always been the object of rhetorical endeavors, there has been a shift in emphasis away from the construction of the message itself to the participatory nature of the audience with the development of sophisticated CMC tools. Whereas previously the audience has been viewed as a passive group receiving messages, it is now viewed as the co-constructor of meanings: the audience is now prosumer (producer-consumer) and rather than consumer. This does not imply that the audience has become the voice of authority, but it does indicate a need to take the nature of the audience, its context, and its interest in active participation seriously.

The value of practices is a second important theme to emerge from the correlation of communication and theology, as is the role of narrative in identity formation and ethical behavior. While these are certainly not new discoveries, the context in which they are being applied is radically different. Whereas practices or identity formation was once grounded in a local and geographic location with a broad set of assumption and experiences shared by a large number of people, there is not, in CMC, a normative or standard context which can be assumed. Without the basis of shared experience and

\(^{40}\) This is not, of course, a radically new observation on my part. William Dyrness, for one, made the same observation many years ago while speaking to the shifting nature of mission and church in North America. See “Vernacular Theology” in The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 260-269.
assumptions, the role of audience, context, and message shifts—demanding an increased vigilance towards the interplay of all these factors. Context, therefore, or perhaps better “idiom,” is the fourth significant correlation to be noted: if the context is not known and the language is not shared, even the best of messages may remain incomprehensible. For example, in a physical church a context is established and shared by participants. If you are present in that context assumptions are made about the reason for being there. It is possible that the symbols, rituals, and language are unfamiliar, but you are there purposefully. However, a visit to an online church cannot assume purpose in the same way. Perhaps a wrong key was stroked. Perhaps a hyperlink was misleading and you ended up there by accident. The result is that the online church must present itself and its message with utmost clarity, transparency, and force in order to attract attention and visitors.

With these intertwined qualities and characteristics serving as a framework suitable for bringing theology and communication together, it is possible to draw tentative relationships between these disciplines and the four thematic concerns lifted up in Chapter Four: authority, community, mediation, and embodiment.

Authority

Despite initial impressions, authority is not necessarily located in the CMC audience/community as may first be imagined. The audience is highly valued as an interpretive center with participatory inclinations, but it is not necessarily established as the authority in ecclesiological matters. Lindbeck, Hauerwas, and Vanhoozer would all
agree that ultimate authority resides in the text—in this case Scripture—and in tradition. This is not the same, of course, as reader-response theory, for which all meaning is centered on the reader rather than the text. But it does lift up the importance of context and semiotic structures that affect the way a text is read and experienced. Each of the communication theories mentioned above affirm the need to know the audience, value its worldview, and speak the appropriate language. Whether speaking of producers (which in some cases is equated with authority) or prosumers, fluency in the operative symbol system is essential if a message is going to be effective and compelling. Therefore, the interpretive imperative of these theories cannot be neglected.

Community

The concept of community is clearly present in the conjunction of communication theory and theology, especially as focused on the power of narrative to shape a community and the way in which shared practices bring narrative to life. Though I do not believe any of the theologians mentioned would advocate for a cyber-church, I do believe their emphasis on the convergence of meaning, practices, and communal interaction could provide insights for designing an ecclesial community that maintained each of these dimensions. For example, when considering practices as a means of participating in and upholding the values of the community, there may be room to expand upon traditionally accepted practices. Blogging might be considered a spiritual practice. Just as some people pray silently, others keep diaries, and others pour their spirit into literary form, blogging is a way of sharing spiritual insights and evoking deep reflection.
by readers. It is also a way to marshal the growing desire to be participatory and interactive in spiritual and theological matters and not merely passive receivers of content. Blogging may be one way to connect the collective intelligence of the community with a format that allows interaction and dialogue on matters once confined to limited participants. Because blogging is a participatory event, when applied to theology and the church it becomes a way to expand and enhance the voice of those too often silenced in a more authoritarian environment. Fostering transparency, immediacy and intellectual self reliance, blogging permits a broad base of authority, knowledge, and opinion. Just as participatory journalism is increasing and gaining credence, blogs by untrained theologians are being recognized as an important voice within the church. Justin Bailey goes on to suggest that blogging and other interactive communications

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41 Justin A Bailey makes just this point in his chapter “Welcome to the Blogosphere” in Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 173-188; interestingly, though he suggests blogging as a spiritual practice, he is adamantly opposed to the online church (p. 184ff).

42 Ibid., p. 177.

43 It should be noted, however, that in the Pew Internet and American Life Projects report Generations 2010, a decrease in blogging was noted in some age groups, which could, over time effect the interaction of blogging and the church life as age groups fragment into different media and machine use: “Only 14% of teens ages 12-17 worked on their own blog as of 2009, a drastic decrease since 2006, when twice as many (28%) said they had done so. Millennials have also seen a decline in blogging over the past couple years, from 20% in December 2008 to 18% in May 2010… it is possible that status updates and other functions that are incorporated into increasingly-popular social network sites may be replacing stand-alone blogs for young people. Yet while blogging is less common for internet users under 34, it has increased in popularity most among older generations. Blogging among members of Gen X increased from 10% in December 2008 to 16% in May 2010, and 11% of Younger and Older Boomers currently blog as well. The result is a slight increase in blogging for adults overall, from 11% in late 2008 to 14% in 2010.” Kathryn Zickuhr, Generations 2010, Pew Internet & American Life Project, (December 16, 2010), http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Generations-2010/Trends/Blogging.aspx (accessed February 10, 2011).
could evolve into a “theology of participation” as opposed to earlier passive theological traditions. His voice is not alone in this opinion:

We have to ask ourselves, if blogging is the solution, what’s the problem? In a word: communication. Blogging is all about connecting communities through conversation. Churches have traditionally excelled at one-way communication. We are more comfortable modeling our ministries after television, broadcasting our message to passive and silent viewers. There is a new generation, though, that is no longer satisfied by this one-way relationship. They have grown up in an Internet-driven culture that celebrates participation. The passive consumer has been replaced with an active, engaged, and empowered contributor. Blogging is simply online hospitality—opening your door, inviting people inside, and sharing stories.  

44 Bailey, Brian with Terry Storch, The Blogging Church: Sharing the Story of Your Church through Blogs (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 15; however, this view does not coincide with the research produced in the Generation 2010 report, noted in the previous footnote.
our messages." Words and actions are both powerful, and both are a part of message construction and CMC. For this reason, and because of the association of Speech Act Theory with so many aspects of the Christian tradition, Speech Act Theory has an important role to play as an interpretive medium in ecclesiological developments.

Words, within the Christian tradition, have force and power and convey an action beyond the words themselves. For example, “This is the body of Christ,” or “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” In each case the words function to transform reality in some way. These words are also actions.

Clearly, what is of particular significance for this study is the consideration of Speech Act Theory and sacraments in the context of CMC. How important are the words and language rules we use in grasping the sacramentality of particular actions? Speech Act Theory would have it that the power of the intent of the words spoken is a force in itself. When it is said “this is the body of Christ,” something is different than it was before those words were spoken. The words themselves are efficacious. In applying this to the question of virtual sacraments, it is worth considering the power of these words in the absence of a shared ritual object. For instance, if online participants have their own cup and bread before them, is the bread and cup transformed by the words of institution, or is it the words themselves that are important no matter what is being used as a physical representation? Another way to look at it is to wonder at the efficacy of the words if the

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45 Frost and Hirsch, 154.
moment is being shared through video cameras or Skype, for example, with each participant providing his or her own bread and wine: why are the words not efficacious if the substance is present but in different locales?

Focusing for a moment on the Epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit during the Eucharistic prayer)—an essential part of the liturgy—what happens if the words are meaningless to the hearer because they speak another “language?” In some traditions the Epiclesis represents the moment when the bread and wine are transformed and transubstantiated. However, if the hearer of these words is not part of the narrative history into which the Epiclesis adheres, and does not recognize these words as significant or as meaning the same thing that the speaker intended, they lose their power. Or do they? Is the efficacy at least partially completed in the speaking of the words? And if it is the Holy Spirit who is the administrator of efficacy (as Vanhoozer would have it), cannot the efficacy of the words exist in spite of no one hearing deeply? Generally, Speech Act Theory requires both the speaker and the listener to participate in the rules and assumptions of the language used in order for the intended meaning to be conveyed. But perhaps when Speech Act Theory is applied to the Trinity, the rules are unleashed and something new occurs.

Embodyment

Vanhoozer has also made interesting claims about mediation in his theo-dramatic understanding of revelation and narrative. Because he sees humans as participating in
God’s drama as performers of the Gospel, the mediation of grace becomes a participatory experience and not just an act of cognitive assent. Jones also speaks of our performative relationship with grace, noting that even as we perform, we are also “performed” by the Gospel: “These [unconscious but socially constructed scripts of personhood] are not only performed by us; they also have constitutive power to perform us.” In this view, humans become the signs of grace themselves, which in turn mediates God’s intentions and promises to the world. Theo-drama is an embodied performance of grace and includes the full range of practices and attitudes that the narrative proclaims. Practicing the narrative merges narrative and interpretation into a whole. That practices are best done in a community is something both disciplines agreed upon, and in fact is a requirement in some communication theories. Without the shared sensibilities and realities of a community, practices are meaningless, for there is no interpretive framework or norm to apply to them.

In a sense, the correlation of communication theories and theology forms a hermeneutical circle for considering these four prominent themes, with each one circling into the next. The themes and categories utilized in this hermeneutical circle are not mutually exclusive, and they meld into one another because of the pervasive similarities and concerns they share. Heidi Campbell, a scholar of religion and new media, has

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46 See section four of The Drama of Doctrine, “The Performance.”

suggested an interpretive model for organizing the intersection of religion and communication, calling it Religious-Social Shaping of Technology. I believe this paradigm can serve as another interpretive tool in discerning the viability of cyber-ecclesiology, and to that I now turn.

**Religious-Social Shaping of Technology**

Campbell’s paradigm for assessing religion and media grows out of a relatively new area of study called “social shaping of technology.” In this field “Technology is seen as a social process and the possibility is recognized that social groups may shape technologies towards their own ends, rather than the character of the technology determining use and outcomes. Studies taking this outlook examine how social processes within a particular group influence the ways users negotiate and describe their interactions with different technologies. In turn, these social interactions shape how users perceive of the technologies and engage with them in future use.”

The social shaping of technology is also closely related to “social construction of technology,” which studies the choices made by technology users and the interplay of needs, demands, and social processes.

Religious-Social Shaping of Technology is an attempt to study the social settings in which a particular technology is used, as well as looking at the social setting of the

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49 Ibid., 53-53.
users themselves. Campbell contends that religious communities form a “moral economy,” based on shared beliefs, values, and experiences, which in turn shapes the community’s use of technology. The purpose and definition of religious-social shaping of technology is offered by Campbell:

it seeks to give an account of the specific conditions that occur within a religious user’s negotiations with a technology. This can lead to changes in use within a given social context. It also attempts to explain responses to new technology in socio-technological terms. In other words, the success, failure, or redesign of a given technology by a specific group of users is based, not simply on the innate qualities of the technology, but also on the ability of users to socially construct the technology in line with the moral economy of the user community or context…the religious-social shaping of technology recognizes that individuals and groups of actors within particular social situations see their choices and options constrained by broader structural elements of their world view and belief.50

An element of religious-social shaping of technology that makes it a distinctive contribution to the consideration of ecclesiology and CMC is its focus on both contemporary values and beliefs as well as a focus on the historical, spiritual, theological, and moral traditions informing contemporary positions. With this in mind, Campbell proposes a four step analysis of technology use within religious communities: reviewing history and tradition, consideration of core beliefs and patterns, the negotiation process, and the concluding communal framing of the technology use and the discourses surrounding their use.

50 Ibid., 58-59; As an example of the use of religious-social shaping of technology, Campbell briefly reviews the reaction of the Amish community to first the telephone and then the cell phone, noting the process of negotiation and adaptation interacting with their religious values. (pp. 54-56).
Unlike many forms of communication and technology analysis which focus solely on current patterns of use, Campbell proposes beginning with a review of the history and tradition of the particular religious community. She notes that the community’s relationship to their oral tradition or text is often a sound indicator of future relationships with newer media. By looking at the ongoing relationship of media and the use of doctrine, tradition, and theology, it is possible to note “how history and tradition form standards and a trajectory for future media negotiations.”

The second phase of her paradigm turns to the study of core religious beliefs and patterns within the community. This is a turn to the intersection of theology and practice. She suggests that: “Researchers should seek to identify the community’s dominant social and religious values and how they are integrated into patterns of contemporary life…close attention should be paid to how core beliefs guide communal decision-making processes related to media use and what patterns of use this encourages and discourages.”

Following a close look at the context of decision-making, Campbell turns to the investigation of the negotiation process at work when a new form of technology is encountered. The negotiation process is the convergence of historical interactions with technology, theological considerations, and the process used to determine if change and innovation is faithful or merely cultural accommodation. At this junction the technology

\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{51} Ibid., 60.} \]

\[\text{\footnotesize \cite{52} Ibid., 61.} \]
is often refused, but when it is accepted it will often be adapted to fit the community’s particular beliefs and values. This phase of the analysis is also a time to consider authority structures within the community: where they reside, their strength and persuasive power, and the role of collective intelligence as a guiding force.\textsuperscript{53}

The final stage of the religious-social shaping of technology process considers the outcome of the negotiation process in light of the community’s history, tradition, and belief system. Campbell claims that even though this “after-effect” of the negotiation process is infrequently studied, it is an important area for consideration because it requires a “re-shaping” of the community’s social sphere and public presence:

“Researchers should consider how new technology influences the social sphere of the community and requires amendment to previous language about media technology or even that new ones be constructed and publicized. The adoption and adaptation of a technology may require the religious group to create a public discourse that validates the technology within the community or creates boundaries for acceptable use in light of established community values.”\textsuperscript{54}

While Campbell has proposed this paradigm as a model for researchers studying religious communities and technology, I suggest it can also serve an important role in determining the ecclesial viability of a cyber-church. When combined with the other

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 62.
forms of analysis previously noted, a robust process of analysis is established that can be used by any religious community seeking a deeper understanding of its identity and its relationship to technology and message construction. This analytical tool includes threads of research and theory drawn from communication studies, theology, ecclesiology, the historical analysis of particular traditions, religious-social shaping of technology, and the use of practices as a way to engage the narrative and bring it to life within particular contexts. In conclusion, I will turn now to a more elaborate review of this process and its application to understanding ecclesial communities and their commitments to technology and tradition.

**Conclusion**

Ineke de Feijter posits an understanding of practical theology and communication that is helpful while noting the ongoing tensions between the two disciplines: “The concept of practical theology as theology of praxis and hermeneutics of lived religion in a mediated communication society like ours straightforwardly relates theology and communication. The question of how these fields are exactly connected to one another in contemporary times, however, has been under continuous debate for more than 25 years now.”

I concur with her analysis, and suggest a convergence of communication theories, CMC studies, theology, ecclesiology, history, and religious-social shaping of

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technology to form a framework for evaluating the validity of the cyber church. Feijter offers the concept of dialogue as an overarching theme: “we opted for communication as dialogue. Foremost, because it is an essential ontological feature and the heart of human and divine existence, as Buber explained, and—thus also—of Christianity and churches. But also because of its relational aspects—of vital importance with respect to the intercultural and inter-religious conflicts, global living together, and both religious and non-religious fundamentalism.”

Her choice of dialogue is an essential component of her approach to communication, in part because of its relational character, but also because it transcends much of the disagreement among communication scholars and theologians. She notes the variety of ways these topics are approached and that they have unfortunately been more problematic than helpful in many contexts because of their distinctive approaches.

Because of the tension among competing paradigms as they currently exist, I suggest the convergence of a slightly different set of analytical tools to

56 Ibid., 319.

be used in dialogue with one another rather than as independent, absolutized hermeneutical models. Each component of this suggested convergence offers a distinctive feature in approaching ecclesial communities and their search for meaning. There are four dimensions to this convergence: CMC, communication theory, theology and tradition, and the marks of the church. This fourth dimension, the marks of the church will, will be highlighted in the following chapter. For the present I will focus on the other three because of their interplay within the conversation between ecclesiology and communication theory.

Computer-Mediated Communication

The work of Dawson and Campbell offers substantive models for determining the nature of technology and its interface with community and theology. Dawson suggested a six point criteria for an online community: “(1) interactivity; (2) stability of membership; (3) stability of identity; (4) netizenship and social control; (5) personal concern; (6) occurrence in a public space.” While established as a way to define the existence of virtual community, it is interesting to note that each of these criteria can be usefully applied to physical communities as well, permitting the evaluation of online communities and physical communities by the same standards. This, in turn, expands


59 Dawson, 85.
the dialogue between physical churches and cyber-churches because it permits a common

ground for assessing communal characteristics and values. Religious-social shaping of
technology builds on that common ground by offering a way for existing communities—
of any nature—to reflect on their history and self-identity in relationship to the use of old

as well as emerging technologies.

The intention of establishing definitive standards for evaluation is to offer a

normative basis from which to begin an inquiry. Thus, using Dawson’s requirements for
defining a community—electronic or physical—will offer the church away to draw
together what has formerly been separate. This not only precludes an us/them mentality
but also allows each community to review its commitment to maintaining a healthy
community. Campbell’s Religious-Social Shaping of Technology offers a qualitative
assessment of a community’s relationship to technology as well as an interpretive
opportunity for the community as it reconsiders its historical roots and their influence on
current practices and interpretations.

Implicit in this consideration of the work of Dawson and Campbell is the

philosophical and technological developments that have influenced the human
relationship to machines. Trying to match the rapid development of technology with the
ability to conceptualize its application to every aspect of life has been an ongoing
challenge—one that has created a tension between tradition and innovation, technological
determinism and unguarded enthusiasm, human being and machine. My intention is to
incorporate these two particular aspects of CMC study into an evaluative process because
of their ability to transcend the boundaries of either the physical or the virtual to the benefit of both.

Communication Theory

Within the discipline of communication theory several useful theories have emerged as potential tools in analyzing the goals and methods of communication as an ecclesial community. These include Narrative Theory, Interpretive Communities, and Speech Act Theory. While these three theories represent an immensely broad sweep of theoretical possibilities, they do point to the importance of context, message construction, and the role of shared language and narrative. In applying these theories, as explained earlier, we are given the theoretical tools to explore the nature of the community/audience by considering the context of the participants and their shared experiences. As both communicators and theologians note, there is very little interpretation of a text or message that can occur apart from a communal context. The focus on community and its narrative underpinnings helps to shift the goal of communication theory from a functional analysis of a situation to a consideration of values and meaning. The use of the logic of good reason is one example of this. Speech Act Theory and its transposition into “theodrama” is another way of acknowledging the role of the audience as participants in a drama that has meaning beyond what they themselves construct. In the mutual emphasis on participation and the power of the act, Speech Act Theory as a tool could allow an ecclesial community to reflect on its own understanding of the Word at work in their
midst and the interrelationship of practice and performance within the particular community and the world.

Again, the usefulness of these three theories of communication is that they are applicable across media and across communities. As a community seeks to determine its relationship to media and the virtual world it can also assess its own commitment to values, meaning, and self-identity as represented in its narrative basis and practices, as well as the importance of message construction and the value and meaningfulness of symbols both verbal and visual.

Theology and Tradition

Finally, the third dimension of theology and tradition as a tool for evaluation and reflection can be found embedded in existing contexts and traditions, albeit often obscured by disinterest or ignorance. A familiarity with theology and ecclesial traditions is an essential component to any evaluation of ecclesial communities. I want to suggest that a renewed appreciation of the history and practices of our particular ecclesial communities will awaken new understandings of the role of narrative as a formative part of our experience. A reflection on our historical relationship to our texts, practices, and media use will both be informative and provocative as it permits an attentive review of the intermingling of theological traditions and cultural contexts and norms. Each community will, of course, have a distinctive history and context to review, but with the foundational status of Christian narrative and the historical traditions of the church still at work in the world, it is possible that a consensus might emerge among discreet
communities—or at the very least the opportunity for dialogue and conversation may ensue.

For example, there is currently a significant breach between conservative evangelical churches and mainline churches. One arena in which this divide is noticeable is in the use of technology. The difference in relationship to media is not new,\(^\text{60}\) but has been continually energized by the distinctive purposes of these two types of churches: the conservative evangelicals and the need to share the Gospel and the “evangelical impulse,” as opposed to the mainline church’s role as protector of the true faith its status within social structures. Elitism surfaced among the mainline communities in an attitudinal prejudice toward technology, imagery, communicative channels open to spontaneity (which is often identified with the irrational and unconsidered), to mass appeal, and to mass access. The result I was a distancing among denominational groups, polarizing them into those who represent popular religion and those who represent traditional faith. Popular religion became aligned with—and continues to be aligned with—the evangelical impulse and its enthusiastic embrace of any method that will spread the Gospel. The more traditional denominations, often the mainline churches, perceived themselves as the keepers of tradition, aesthetic propriety, and intellectual rigor. The mainline churches offered reasoned ethical and social critique of emerging technologies, thoughtfully and thoroughly assessing the situation before acting, while the evangelical Christians subsumed the newest innovations and technologies into their

\(^{60}\) For additional information about Charles Finney, see Chapter Three, pages 112-113.
strategies to fulfill their professed mission to spread the Gospel, and were seen to be anti-intellectual in their lack of reasoned reflection. This polarization continues to occlude the fruitful possibilities of an active engagement between the traditional and the innovative, the mind and the heart.\(^{61}\)

This example of historical interactions and attendant practices speaks to the necessity of considering our historical roots and the use of theology and tradition to maintain a position in society. As we consider our particular church histories and the practices which we honor and adhere to, we may come to see the variety of faithful instantiations available to us, which, in fact, might be meaningful and valuable if reconsidered in the current context.

In the North American context, where communities are emerging or realigning their practices and values in increasingly creative ways, finding a paradigm for thoughtful

reflection and understanding of ecclesial life that combines theological values as well as communication theory is imperative. Consider this image of an online community:

This is the social network map of an online community. The author describes this community in this way: “Every node in the network represents a person. A link between two nodes reveals a relationship or connection between two people in the community—the social network. Most on-line communities consist of three social rings—a densely connected core in the center, loosely connected fragments in the second ring, and an outer ring of disconnected nodes, commonly known as lurkers. Communities have various levels of belonging—each represented by one of these rings.”

What I find particularly interesting is that this diagram also looks to me like a physical community. Communities have at least these three levels of interaction, ranging from the personally connected core to the peripheral and occasional participants. According to this article on marketing and expanding online communities, the peripheral community is often two thirds of the community whereas the central community may be only ten percent of the total. While the peripheral community may identify with the “narrative” of the whole community, there is not the shared concern or regular commitment to the community that Dawson considers imperative. The middle range of clusters are those who have many needs met by the community, but are just as likely to look beyond the community to other sources of gratification—particularly if their contacts within the community also look elsewhere.


63 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.
Anecdotally, this image of an online community is mirrored in many physical ecclesial communities that have a large membership but have relatively clear demarcations of commitment and level of activity. There is usually a core membership that holds positions of responsibility and is consistently participative in a variety of community activities and relationships. The middle range are those who attend sporadically and participate in programs or projects that are of interest but who are not willing to commit to consistent and deep levels of relationship. The outer ring reflects those who may or may not be members but are rarely in attendance even if they uphold the values and principles of the community, and are likely participants only at the time of religious festivals or personal ritual needs.

In looking at this diagram of a community, it is possible to apply the interpretive resources of CMC, communication theory and theology and tradition in order to understand the workings of the community. For example, which of the “levels” of community involvement is the audience? Does a church aim to speak to the core participants, or is the less-attentive periphery the audience? Can the messages be the same, assuming the familiarity with the narrative assumptions and language skills are not shared? How can the connections between the different levels of community participation be developed? Is that development restricted to one type of interaction, one venue, one message? And how are these determinations made?

However these questions are answered, the process and intentional reflection on the nature and mission of the church needs to be applied to both the physical and the
cyber church. A thorough reflection on the nature and mission of any ecclesial body in its local context is a valuable and truly essential requirement for establishing identity and maintaining priorities and practices. Perhaps the universal church would benefit as a whole if more clarity—or at least intentional reflection—was a regular and ongoing part of any ecclesial community.

I have argued that the convergence of these particular academic discourses can bring about at least three results. First, it will begin to be possible to determine the viability and integrity of the cyber-church. Secondly, it will provide a normative grounding and guidelines for the evaluation of any community as to its ecclesial condition. And finally, it will offer a process to assess one’s own relationship to technology and online interactions, as well help understand these particular relationships exist.

In my concluding chapter I will add a fourth dimension to this interpretive process: the marks of the church. With the addition of this fourth interpretive strand I will propose a hermeneutical process to evaluate the five selected cyber-churches on the basis of this proposal, and conclude with a description of a renewed ecclesial understanding that exists and can be utilized to inform an ongoing reflective process.
CHAPTER SEVEN

EVALUATION: CAN THE CHURCH BE THE CHURCH ONLINE?

“By what stretch of the imagination can one choose the church of Carthage in the mid-third century to represent the whole church?”¹

In July, 2010, a British Methodist pastor announced he would be serving communion via “tweets.” Using Twitter, a social networking technology that permits messages of 140 characters to be sent to Twitter users, the Reverend Tim Ross intended to send the Eucharistic prayers in this abbreviated format, which would then be read aloud by each user and responded to with a tweet of “Amen.” Following the prayers the elements would be shared individually by each tweeter simultaneously.² However, before the service could take place, Ross was “urged” by denominational authorities to cancel the service, which he did. The reason for the cancellation, Ross said:

The assistant secretary of the Methodist Conference, the Revd Ken Howcroft, said that the Church understood Mr Ross’s passion for the importance of communion and of using new media in mission; but the Church needed to “reflect and pray deeply in order to discern what developments are appropriate”. In an article for the Methodist Recorder, Mr Ross said objections to the Twitter communion had been raised by the Methodist Church Faith and Order Committee, which said it was “not a valid communion”. The idea of “remote communion”, where participants receive the bread and wine at the same time, but in different places,


“conflicts with the ethos of the Conference report ‘His Presence Makes the Feast’ (2003) which talks about ‘embodied worship’.”

The Reverend Ross responded: “the report’s reference to “disembodied spirits” did not say that participants must be in the same physical place, but rather referred to the attitude of those present. “The issue boils down to two questions: Is remote communion a valid communion? Is the Christian community on the Internet a valid, gathered Christian community? If the answer to both these questions is ‘Yes’, then a communion service performed by such a community of believers must be valid and may be performed.”

Despite volumes of literature on the topic of the meaning, nature, and constitution of community on the Internet, within ecclesial communities the issue has not been resolved. The question remains locked in debate about the meaning of embodiment within a community, as well as issues touching on authority, mediation, and the nature of the church itself. As technologies continue to evolve and offer new means of interaction, these issues also shift in their intensity and focus. Because of the diversity and fluidity of the elements in this debate, I suggest that an evaluative tool which can be applied to a community to establish its authenticity as church would have practical applications within any local context or community. In an attempt to mark a beginning point for a dialogue rather than a debate, this tool is really a hermeneutical process that takes into

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account various historical, theological, and contextual factors in an effort to disentangle the matrix of associations and assumptions that are a part of this debate. To this end I propose a three part hermeneutical process that is general in form and only specific when applied to a particular community. I will first describe the three stages of this process, followed by its application to the i.ucc website, one of the five websites originally chosen as potential online ecclesial communities.

**Proposed Hermeneutical Process**

In the previous chapter I highlighted three dimensions of an interpretive process that could fruitfully be applied to this ecclesiological question. They were theology and tradition, communication theory, and computer mediated communication (CMC). I will return to these three aspects of my proposed hermeneutical process after first highlighting an ecclesiological component of this process that has so far received very little attention. The missing piece is the *notae ecclesiae*, the marks of the church in both their ancient and Reformed understandings.

*Notae Ecclesiae*

In Chapter Three I mentioned the Reformed understanding of the marks of the church, focusing particularly on Calvin’s definition of the church: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to
Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists [cf. Eph. 2:20].”

The nature of the church was, prior to the Reformation, based on the “marks” of the church as derived from the Nicene Creed: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Despite their long tradition, there is no single, accepted definition of the church, either historically or currently. The classic marks are frequently used as a starting point for conversation, but they are by no means inclusive of all that is to be said about the church. One’s ecclesiastical tradition will clearly be central to one’s accepted definition of church. The Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and various protestant denominations each bring different nuances to an understanding of the church, and this creates a vibrant and virtually infinite combination of possibilities that defies a monolithic definition.

There is, moreover, a line of ecclesiological thought that attempts to define the church without the marks. This line of thought can be attributed, I believe, to the ascendancy of post-Enlightenment thinking and its disavowal of rigid, absolute categories in conjunction with the development of liberation theologies and reclamation of the priesthood of all believers and its sense of “distributed intelligence.” This is the same dynamic that has pushed Healy to discard “blueprint ecclesiology” as the way to

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5 Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36-38; “blueprint ecclesiology” is described as “...what the church should ideally become.” (36); “Blueprint ecclesiologies are dependent for their normative force upon agreement regarding the fundamental starting point, upon the model.”(36); the reason they do not work, in Healy’s words: “…difficulties with the blueprint approach indicate the need for an alternative that better reflects the proper function of ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is not about the business of finding the
understand church, for it does not allow for the dynamism and plurality of expression that also marks the church. A positive aspect of the move away from absolute definitions and models is the acknowledgement of pluralism as a constitutive element of the church even from the earliest of times. Pluralism of expression was the norm in scripture, and this has continued to be true.\textsuperscript{6} There have always been a variety of expressions of church.

Drawing upon three contemporary theologians, from different backgrounds, I want to highlight alternative ways of defining the church that use traditional language but in less restrictive and exclusive terms. Leonardo Boff states: “The church comes into being as church when people become aware of the call to salvation in Jesus Christ, come together in community, profess the same faith, celebrate the same eschatological liberation, and seek to live the discipleship of Jesus Christ.”\textsuperscript{7} For Boff, the basic and essential fact of the church is faith.\textsuperscript{8} Though he does not discredit practices and doctrines as important to the church, they are not the essence of the church: faith in Jesus Christ is the uniting and normative force of Christian community.

\begin{quote}

single right way to think about the church, of developing a blueprint suitable for all times and places. Rather, I propose that its function is to aid the concrete church in performing its tasks of witness and pastoral care within what I will call its ‘ecclesiological context.’


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 19.
\end{quote}
Letty Russell offers a different definition of church, but, like Boff, moves past the identification of particular marks or institutional forms: “[church is] a community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome.”

Roger Haight adds an additional dimension to the definition of church by emphasizing the multiplicity of qualities constituting the church. His definition of the church highlights the purpose of the church: “the church is the historical community of the disciples of Jesus animated by God as Spirit whose goal is to continue and expand Jesus’ message in history.”

What unites these definitions is both the absence and presence of particular characteristics. They are mutually lacking explicit reference to specific institutional forms, practices, or dogma. There are no absolutes about what constitutes an institution, what qualifies as ministry, what discipleship looks like, or what is included in authentic teaching. Yet they all put Christ at the center, with faith in Christ as the engendering principle of church. They also share two additional qualities: primacy of the Holy Spirit and discipleship.

The Holy Spirit is essential to the church in the work of these three theologians, as well as in many others. The implication of a church founded upon the work of the Spirit is to move the focus away from an anthropological emphasis on institutional life and organization, allowing for spontaneity, change, and the unexpected. Attention to the

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10 Ibid., 134.
Holy Spirit also communicates the ongoing presence of God in the church, as well as the continuity of purpose for the church as a gathering of people committed in faith to Christ and the Kingdom of God.

Discipleship is the other dimension of church that is emphasized by these contemporary theologians. Discipleship is a way of life seeking to integrate the teachings of Jesus with values and actions reflecting scriptural and ethical commitments. Discipleship seeks to share Christ with others, moving the particular and the local to the global and universal through embodiment and example as well as thorough proclamation of the Word. As both a personal and social commitment, discipleship is embedded in a variety of church practices, combining personal discipline and missional enthusiasm. Discipleship practices may include worship, prayer, study, proclamation, discerning the work and will of the Holy Spirit, as well as many others. George Lings emphasizes the necessity of expressing one’s faith through discipleship by delineating a four-fold understanding of “missional life;” an upward-facing dimension that seeks God and being like God (holiness); an inward-facing dimension that focuses on a community patterned upon the Trinity (oneness); an outward-facing dimension which reflects the sending out of the apostles (apostolic); and an all-round-facing dimension that sees each expression of the church as a part of a greater whole (catholic).  

In this formulation Lings incorporates the historical marks of the church while focusing on a more functionalist

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11 George Lings, “Unravelling the DNA of Church: How Can We Know that What is Emerging is ‘Church’?” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, vol. 6, no. 1, (March 2006): 109.
agenda, which favors pluralism, fluidity, the work of the Holy Spirit, and discipleship as a way to express the church’s faithfulness to Christ.

There is another important dimension of ecclesiology that is not referenced in any of the definitions of church offered above. I mentioned earlier that none of these definitions advocate for a particular institutional vision of church. Though it is common now to be reminded that a church is not a building—but rather a people—there is a historic precedent for locating church in a particular geographical location. A parish was conceived as a politico-religious entity that demarcated the bounds of administration and pastoral care for a particular cleric in a particular area.\(^\text{12}\) Likewise, a “congregation” is associated with a particular gathering of people in one physical place. By placing their faith in a community rather than a “congregation” or a “church” (a word that is in-itself value laden, because it can be used as a synonym for an architectural structure), and by leaving organizational characteristics out of the definition, the definitions of church listed above help re-focus attention on Christ and the Holy Spirit rather than on the “visible,” or human (in its historical and cultural particularities) expressions of church. Though clearly these expressions of church are intimately and historically intertwined, it is a valuable exercise to look at each expression for its own merit.

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Haight offers an analysis of his definition of church through the lens of two types of ecclesiology which speak to the shift in language and categories apparent in this less spatial way of thinking. He labels these an “ecclesiology from above,” and an “ecclesiology from below.” In looking towards the possible existence of an online church, the distinctions between these two ways of viewing the church are constructive. One’s preference for an understanding of church or ecclesiology will determine, in part, how (or if) one can imagine the church to exist anywhere authentically and faithfully in the twenty-first century. Haight offers his two models of ecclesiology not as a way to define church, but as “a method or approach to understand it.”

He suggests six characteristics of an ecclesiology from above, beginning with its a-historical nature: it does not dwell on particular historical “accidents” of church, but rather on the essence of the church and those aspects of a church that are transcendent, eternal, and fixed. In doing so, often it is one’s own tradition that is considered to be correct, or the most representative, of God’s intentions. In addition, an ecclesiology from above assumes a particular norm or foundation as its authoritative source. For many Christians this foundation is scripture, and for many Christians it also includes councils, creeds, and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Doctrine becomes another authoritative source, and is often associated with scripture and tradition. Christology is the central theological theme in this ecclesiology, subsuming all other Trinitarian expressions by focusing on

\[13\] Haight, 18.
Christ’s immanent presence in all aspects of the church. What makes this problematic is the tendency to conflate Christology as a central theme and the church as the center of Christian life, leading eventually to ecclesiocentrism. Finally, forms of organization and ministry are hierarchical and tend to be associated with the will of God.\(^\text{14}\)

In comparison, Haight suggests six parallel categories for an ecclesiology from below, which begins concretely and historically rather than abstractly and idealistically. The first move is toward postmodernism as a cultural and historical context that is defined by a variety of experiences, values, ideas, and symbols. Haight provides examples of this shift: “a historical consciousness that is deeper and more radical than that of modernity; an appreciation of pluralism that is suspicious of all absolute or universal claims; a consciousness of the social construction of the self that has completely undermined the transcendental ego of modernity and, ironically, encouraged a grasping individualism; a sense of the size, age, complexity, and mystery of reality that modern science never even suspected.”\(^\text{15}\) In contrast to an a-historical, idealized approach, a postmodern approach takes its context seriously. Just as postmodernism is a global condition recognized by an ecclesiology from below, so also all of Christianity is considered to be a legitimate object of concern, rather than privileging a particular denomination or communion. Haight then describes the value of a critical-historical

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\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 19-25.

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 57.
method in establishing foundations and authority. Experience, praxis, and church origins are critically analyzed for their contemporary relevance, thereby acknowledging the plurality of expressions and fluidity of form intrinsically related to human existence. Unlike an ecclesiology from above and its Christocentric emphasis, an ecclesiology from below is pneumatocentric, which makes the history of the community “a narrative of the way God as Spirit, sometimes identified with the risen Christ, accompanies and animates the growing and spreading body of Jesus’ disciples.”16 The final category is that of “structures and new ministries.” Emerging from a pneumatocentric theology, but still grounded in God’s will for humanity, ministry and organization arise from within the community, and is an ongoing experience rather than a historical tradition imposed upon a community. This offers a communitarian vision of an organization that is empowered from within by the Holy Spirit and God’s will.17 Within this ecclesiology from below I find potential resources to assist in the reconsideration of traditional ecclesiology within our mediatized contemporary environment.

Lings suggests yet another way to appropriate ancient traditions by infusing the traditional marks of the church with a new, “missional,” meaning. He offers a suggestion for a definition of a church that intersects the debate on ecclesial community and the Internet: “A group may be called Church when a diverse community is formed by

16 Ibid., 62.

17 Ibid., 57-65.
transformative encounter with Jesus Christ. Called to follow him, this community lovingly responds through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, seeking to live and act as signs of God’s Kingdom.”

Lings uses the four traditional marks of the church as a way of assessing whether a group of people is actually living as a community of faith. I have appropriated his suggestions for my purposes, indicating his categories with italics, followed by specific characteristics which I have added.

(1) **Mission** rather than the traditional category of apostolicity (a term laden with centuries of meaning) marks a virtual ecclesiology—or perhaps it could be said that apostolicity is understood *as* mission for a virtual ecclesiology. The church is missional insofar as it is sent out, whether as a website, email, or a corporeal being serving in the world. Mission by definition is focused outward upon “the other,” and though the individual engaged in mission may benefit from it as well (in terms of holiness), the purpose is to make known the Kingdom of God. Because an individual—as internet user or embodied being—must incarnate, or mediate, God to the world, the doctrine of incarnation remains central to the mission of the church, even if it is not expressed bodily or in a physical gathering. For example, mission may no longer mean going on a “mission-trip” or building a house for Habitat for Humanity with several other people. Mission may be an individual incarnation, or witness, mediated through CMC or in a

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18 Lings, 114.
human encounter in the context of daily life. But it remains focused on the call to go forth into the world and mediate the good news.

(2) Despite the high potential for individualism in this understanding of mission, oneness can flourish in a community willing to ground itself in scripture and doctrine. For example, two important, and basic, aspects of the Christian tradition can be utilized to establish oneness. First, ecclesial mission will be rooted in the gospel, as a way to learn, teach, and embody Jesus’ witness and ministry, and also as a reminder of the coming reign of God and its radical implications. Secondly, it will embody the relationships found in the Trinity. The perichoretic expression of the Trinity, which emphasizes distinct relationships while mutually participating and interacting with and among one another, serves as a model for unity and relationality without demanding uniformity or conformity among members of the virtual church.

(3) The universal dimension of virtual ecclesiology is both an inward and an outward expression of faithfulness. The tension between the inward and the outward may be experienced in terms of prioritizing commitments, in the challenge to balance personal spiritual needs with the needs of the larger community, or in choosing how to demonstrate support and compassion. But overcoming the tension, in whatever form, will involve a commitment to plurality and the diversity of ways in which compassion, love, and support are shown – and must be shown. This kind of ‘pluralism’, if indeed it can be termed that, is not an add-on extra that a particularly kind or generous individual might choose. A tolerance of and openness to a variety of forms of being the church in
the world is a requirement for maintaining a hospitable, inclusive community that is faithful to Christ and concerned to mediate Christ effectively as possible in as many contexts that are encountered.

(4) *Holiness*, as the fourth mark of the church, is the state of being sacred and set apart as the people of God. As a holy people, Christians are able to live in a way distinctively different from those who have not been set apart. Faithfulness, values, and behaviors are ways in which holiness becomes visible in daily life. Sacred practices are one expression of holiness, including worship, prayer, and loving relationships with others both within and outside the community of faith. The sacraments are one expression of this, but so is the transformation of daily living. Practices are both individual and corporate, and will be the most visibly “off-line” of the marks of the church as people find ways to claim sacred time and space along with the commitment to practice and embody a lived faith.¹⁹

With this final mark we are returned to the first mark—mission—as we enliven the mandate to go forth and be present to others in a way that shares the faith. This can be called a hermeneutical circle of sorts, but it is more of an expression of the perichoresis of the Trinity—the interpenetration and indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity in intimate fellowship that forms both a model and a basis for us to mediate God’s grace and salvation. The active and participatory nature of the perichoretic Trinity

¹⁹ Ibid., 114.
offers a dynamic model for the development of equally dynamic ecclesiolgies and faith communities. In the context of considering the viability of CMC as a host for ecclesial communities, the integration of dynamic relationship and a missional call to go forth into the world converges upon computer mediated communication.

It is imperative to consider the marks of the Church, in both traditional and contemporary form, as an important aspect of Christian history and tradition. Without knowledge of the marks, a sense of Christian identity is diminished and the nature of Christian community in its fullness remains ambiguous. However, as important as the marks of the church are for defining an ecclesial community, they are but one aspect of the theology and tradition being used to gain a full sense of ecclesial community. In addition to a broad understanding of theology and tradition (as expressed in the historical development of particular denominations) communication theory and CMC must be added.

Theology and Tradition

Theology and tradition are clearly a part of any discussion of ecclesiology, and they bring to the conversation an understanding of context and perspective that is not explicit in a review of the notae ecclesiae. Though clearly an important aspect of historical ecclesiology in their own right, the notae ecclesiae are enhanced as a hermeneutical tool when coupled with a review of other historical themes contributing to our understanding of the nature of the church. I want to highlight five specific theological considerations in assessing ecclesial communities: adiaphora, the Extra-Calvinisticum,
the Holy Spirit, the tradition of contextual “confessions” and discernment, and the role of practices in the Christian tradition

The doctrine of *adiaphora* is that of non-essential things. In the Reformed Tradition this doctrine served as a way to distinguish between the Word of God and human traditions. For Calvin it was an acknowledgement of the limit to human understanding and the need for the church to rely on the Word as the source of revelation:

> not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestionable by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith….First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to sum of religion and without loss of salvation.

For Calvin and for those in the Reformed Tradition, doctrinal unity was to take precedence over form, and those doctrines based on the Word of God are the most essential. This provided a way to assess the practices and doctrines of the church in its various contexts while establishing ultimate authority in the Word rather than human tradition. When applied to the cyber-church, *adiaphora* may be able to help determine what is truly essential in our understanding of church.

The Word, the sacraments, and preaching were the essential marks of the church in Calvin’s thought, and it is interesting to note that the Word and proclamation are not

\[\text{Ibid., IV.1.12.}\]
necessarily attached to physicality as they were in the sixteenth century. In fact, the
Word, as text to be read, and preaching—as the Word heard—can be accessed
theoretically through a variety of electronic media. While reading allowed for the initial
separation of the act from its reception—for example, a sermon could be written down
and shared among several people and communities—only with the advent of electronic
media has hearing the Word been potentially separated from the oral act of proclamation
of the Word. The sacraments, on the other hand, have not relinquished their physicality
and remain a major obstacle to the full expression of cyber-church.

A second theological consideration of importance to this hermeneutical process is
the *Extra-Calvinisticum*, the idea that though the human and divine natures were truly
united in Jesus Christ, the divine was never located solely in the flesh. A debate about
the two natures of Christ, it became a divisive doctrine between Lutherans and the
Reformed because the Reformed Tradition could not agree as to the nature of Christ’s
presence in the Eucharist. For Calvin, Christ was everywhere and could not be limited to
the bread and cup. Calvin sought to keep God’s majesty intact while fully
acknowledging the divine nature of Christ: “The Eternal Son never ceases to have his
empire over all things. In the Incarnation he ‘goes out of his way,’ without leaving that
eternal way of boundless power and majesty, to rule over the rebellious creatures
attempting to disrupt the continuity of gracious order. He does not abdicate his eternal
empire but extends it over sinners. He can be Lord in the human predicament he humbly
assumed because he never ceases to be Lord over it according to the Father’s will and
In other words, the Incarnation was local and specific but never ceased to be simultaneously boundless. Therefore, Calvin was unable to consider the localized sacrament of bread and water as Christ’s body and blood because the body of Christ, in its flesh, was gone: “Therefore, since the whole Christ is everywhere, our Mediator is ever present with his own people, and in the Supper reveals himself in a special way, yet in such a way that the whole Christ is present, but not in his wholeness. For as has been said, in his flesh he is contained in heaven until he appears in judgment.” When this doctrine is applied to the Eucharist online, it has the potential to alter the course of the conversation because if the presence of Christ is not limited to the particular object at hand (bread and cup), then it should be possible to celebrate communion/God’s presence even without those particular symbols. Or, even if the particular objects you have at hand have not been part of an official Eucharistic rite and blessing, they may still contain the risen Christ because they are a part of creation, in which Christ is always present.

The third aspect to be noted is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and its work in the world, which is a strong theme within the Reformed Tradition. The work of the Holy Spirit is a prominent feature in Calvin’s thought, and touches individuals, institutions, and all of creation. As individuals, the Holy Spirit is at work within us to unite us with God in order to reclaim our status as children of God. Without the Holy

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21 Ibid., 154.

22 Ibid., IV.17.30.
Spirit at work to move us into relationship, we could not obtain a transformed relationship with God. Within institutions, it is the work of the Spirit that will help us discern the nature of the church and its integrity. Only with the Spirit, and not through our human thinking or reasoning, can we discern the will of God and interpret God’s revelation in scripture. It is also the work of the Holy Spirit that inspires proclamation and the understanding of the sacraments. The Holy Spirit is not limited to the church, however, and is eternally at work in the world to restore and guide all of creation towards the knowledge and glory of God. Calvin is willing to acknowledge the power of the Spirit outside of the church: so, perhaps, the Spirit can be found at work in CMC and Internet communities. Calvin, to my understanding, would not be willing to forgo the possibility that the Spirit can work in any portion of creation.

Calvin and other early Reformed theologians were adamant about the ongoing work of the Spirit in seeking knowledge of God and forming doctrinal statements. The Holy Spirit and the proliferation of Reformed confessions was a mark of a vibrant community willing to subject its faith and understanding to the dynamism of the Spirit. Therefore, confessions—the fourth aspect of historical theology and tradition to be noted—became the doctrinal statements of a particular time, place, and people and were

\[\frac{23}{23}\] Calvin did not limit the work of the Spirit to the Christian church: “If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despite it wherever it shall appear, unless wish to dishonor the Spirit of God.” II.2.15.
statements reflecting God’s Word for that situation. They were not accorded the same value as scripture and were not elevated to that level of authority, however they did reflect the desire to hold God’s sovereignty intact while allowing human fluidity and limited knowledge to function. Calvin maintained the authority of God as found in Scripture and doctrinal understandings while permitting the non-essentials of material faith and the articulation of God’s revelation to be more vague and contextual. This is one reason for the diversity of expression within the Reformed Tradition and its offshoots. It is also what may make it possible for a new form of expression—such as an online community—to be conceivable, workable, and valid as a legitimate form of church in the generic, North American Protestant Reformed tradition. Each generation, in its given time and place, is required to discern the movement of the Spirit and the level of accommodation God is allowing in the interpretation of revelation.

Finally, the fifth historical consideration is that of Christian practices. Calvin called it piety, Gerrish called it the Reformed habitus, and it is now often called, simply, 

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24 By modern standards Calvin may be seen as taking a relativistic stance. However, I believe it is better characterized as dynamic and Spirit-led: “By this one example, we may judge what opinion we should have of this whole class. I mean that the Lord has in sacred oracles faithfully embraced and clearly expressed both the whole sum of true righteousness, and all aspects of the worship of his majesty, and whatever was necessary to salvation; therefore, in these the Master alone is to be heard. But because he did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these. Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the up building of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, we will be safe.” IV.10.30
practices: “Christian practices are patterns of cooperative human activity in and through which life together takes shape over time in response to and in the light of God as known in Jesus Christ. Focusing on practices invites theological reflection on the ordinary, concrete activities of actual people—and also on the knowledge of God that shapes, infuses, and arises from these activities.” Practices, as defined by any of these theologians, or disciplines in the language of other theologians, are a major feature of incarnational Christianity, and it is an incarnational community that lives out its faith and the Christian message. Many traditional Christian practices are corporate, or if not requiring a community they are still customarily practiced within a communal setting. There are also practices that do not require a community setting, and is those practices I wish to highlight here in order to make the point that faithful practices are not restricted to corporate expression but rather can be practiced in other settings as well.

Practices are not always confined to a particular location, which shifts the emphasis away from a physically located expression of community to a more inclusive vision that acknowledges a range of incarnational qualities and locations. Love, for example, can be communicated through words and action, as can social protest and the search for justice. Prayer is another powerful practice, as is discernment, proclamation, and witness. While an incarnational faith does imply praxis, it does not necessarily imply the necessity of a physical gathering or the visibility of corporeal beings at all times or in

all situations. Solitude, for example, has long been a practice of the church, and prayer has never been associated solely with a gathered physical community.

The move away from the emphasis on communal embodiment as the primary criteria for incarnation, or of corporate gathering as an incarnational norm for many activities, is a result of the opening of horizons previously veiled by modernist constraints. The current context in North America is more fluid, more flexible, and more willing to accept a pluralism of expressions of faith rather than being tied to an absolute and invariable set of criteria established long ago. This could be interpreted theologically as a pneumatocentric move, allowing the Holy Spirit to fill, move and expand God’s will in ever-changing, ever-creative directions.

These five examples of the interaction of historical theology, tradition, and ecclesiology are only representative of the number of themes and experiences that are available as hermeneutical tools. Each community opting to undertake a hermeneutical process to clarify its ecclesiological identity will find innumerable resources in its particular historical traditions and ecclesial values. While there is no one historical tradition or understanding that may claim a privileged position in this process, the process of reflection and evaluation remains consistent. When history and tradition are taken seriously and intentionally interfaced with contemporary questions and concerns, a revitalized ability to discern the nature of the church—on or offline—can develop. Reconsideration of our relationship to the narrative of our faith, our understanding of the nature of relationships, our commitment to Christian praxis, and our sense of call to
mission, proclamation, and other forms of witness serves as a platform from which to undertake the remaining tasks in this hermeneutical process.

Communication Theory

The second hermeneutical tool to be applied is that of communication theory. As noted previously, the most useful theories will be those that seek to identify the community (or audience), those that establish hermeneutical principles for interpretive engagement, and those Semiotic theories that consider the force and dynamism of our words and intentions: Narrative Theory, Interpretive Theory, and Speech Act Theory. Within these particular theories we find the way to explore the nature of the community by assessing the narrative choices being made, the practices being expressed, the context of participation and expression, the nature of the messages being shared, and the power of communicative acts for identity formation.

Computer-mediated Communication

This process gains more depth when we add the third hermeneutical tool suggested herein: Computer-Mediated Communication theories. There are two theories in particular that can be applied to our evaluation of online communities. The first is Dawson’s “netizenship” and the second is Campbell’s religious-social shaping of technology. Dawson suggested a six point criteria for an online community: “(1) interactivity; (2) stability of membership; (3) stability of identity; (4) netizenship and
social control; (5) personal concern; (6) occurrence in a public space. While established as a way to define the existence of virtual community, it is interesting to note that each of these criteria can be usefully applied to physical communities as well. These six criteria reflect the social nature of community and the need for interconnectivity. Without active participation by users/members, however, a truly social sphere cannot be maintained.

Campbell expands the connection between virtual communities and religious communities by interfacing technology with the lived experience of any religious community. Her theory of religious-social shaping of technology builds on that common ground by offering a way for existing communities—of any nature—to reflect on their history and self-identity in relationship to the use of old as well as emerging technologies. She offers a four-step process which focuses on the historical, spiritual, theological, and moral traditions informing contemporary positions on the technology use: reviewing history and tradition, consideration of core beliefs and patterns, the negotiation process, and the concluding communal framing of the technology use and the discourses surrounding their use. 

This hermeneutical process centers on the church—the ecclesial community—and it represents the continuous process of forming and reforming community identity (Figure 10). Each of the spheres of influence reflect upon each other in their shared

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26 Dawson, “Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community,” 83; for a more detailed description of his proposal, see Chapter Two, pages 49-52, as well as Chapter Six, pages 282-284.

27 A more thorough description of this process can be found in Chapter Six, pages 276-280.
concerns for faithfulness, meaning and values, history and tradition, vital relationships with significant interaction, stability, and the ongoing ability to remain dynamic and open while remaining faithful and grounded in the revealed narrative. This process is intentionally general rather than specific, for each community will bring to it different experiences, stories, and agendas. The specificity will come as each community grapples with the particular resources that speak to its context and understanding of revelation.

Figure 10. Three-fold hermeneutical process for evaluating contextual ecclesiology

Source: Holly Reed

My intention has been to suggest a variety of possibilities that can apply both to existing physical communities seeking to know themselves and to potential cyber-churches
seeking validity. As a means of testing this process, I will now apply some of these many themes and threads of theory and theology to the five sites I initially reviewed as potential online churches.

**Evaluation of Sites**

In an attempt to focus solely on computer mediated communities that are not based in “street” congregations I initially selected five sites which met the several criteria set out by Helland and Dawson, and which fall within the PIP report’s list of favorite religious/spiritual sites and which make use of a variety of interactive computer applications. These sites included, in some way, the following characteristics:

- Helland’s definition of “Online Religion:” a religious/spiritual site that is primarily interactive rather than informative/resource based, and one that is not the vehicle of particular “street” congregation
- Dawson’s six criteria for a virtual community: interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, netizenship, personal concern for others, and shared experience
- The availability of a variety of interactive computer applications which may include, but are not limited to, video, audio, vocal, blogs, BBS, IM chat, wikis, and animation
- Includes group activities such as study groups, social opportunities, prayer opportunities, and worship opportunities as well as opportunities for conversation and connection
- Will have both synchronous and asynchronous formats

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28 The initial description of these sites can be found in Chapter Two: i.ucc, at http://i.ucc.org/ (pp. 57-61, Figure 1.1-3); LifeChurch.tv, at http://www.lifechurch.tv/ (pp. 61-66, Figure 2.1-9); Friday Study Ministries, at http://www.fridaysstudy.org/ (pp.66-70, Figure 3.1-2); Church of the Blind Chihuahua, at http://www.dogchurch.org/index.shtml (pp. 70-74, Figure 4.1-2); St. Pixel’s, at http://www.stpixels.com/view_releases.cgi (pp. 74-78, Figure 5.1-2).
Many of these criteria overlap and can be found in a variety of applications, and they also change quickly with the evolution of new technology and creative usage. Though I have attempted not to analyze a site based on its use of the newest of applications, it is difficult to consider an “old” application, such as asynchronous blackboard systems, to be as interactive and dynamic as instant messaging, Facebook, or Twitter. It must also be noted that while the hermeneutical process I propose may be universally applicable, it is not easily applied to communities of faith by “outsiders” who are not deeply immersed in the particular community, and I am quite conscious of standing outside of the narrative community to which most of these sites speak. The one exception is the site “i.ucc” which is a site founded by the United Church of Christ, a denomination within the Reformed tradition. As a member of that denomination, I am able to speak from within its context and will use i.ucc as a case study for working with the evaluative hermeneutical process I am suggesting.

i.ucc

The heading on this UCC site says “God is still speaking,” with an emphasis on the comma as a symbol of God’s ongoing relationship with creation. Unfortunately, a “period” replaced the comma and this site was discontinued on July 6, 2010 (Figure 1.3). There is no particular reason given for the discontinuation of i.ucc, though it is alluded to as having served as a precursor to the new site, “Feed Your Spirit” which now hosts three of the most popular features of i.ucc: Daily Devotionals, Weekly Seeds, and the Prayer Chapel. Andy Lang, when serving as the minister for web community, is quoted as
saying “In many ways, [i.UCC] paved the way for ‘Feed Your Spirit’—an important new direction for UCC.org.”29 The emphasis seems to have shifted to “spiritual resources” as embedded within the lead website, ucc.org, and moved away from forming a “community” meeting at a different site, i.ucc.org. Lang notes that the prayer chapel was a place of great spiritual intimacy (which is why it has not been discontinued) and that i.ucc, over the course of its existence attracted 4,500 registered users. He goes on to say: “I believe that if we remain faithful to our vision that genuine Christian community can be sustained through emerging communication technologies, we'll be able to say three years from now that we've continued to make a difference in the lives of seekers and UCC members who've experienced our church as a caring virtual presence.”

Though there is no longer an i.ucc to evaluate, I did turn to the Prayer Chapel which the news article said is still in existence. It is a sub-link to the “Feed Your Spirit” link on the UCC homepage, and it directs you to a Facebook page which has 247 users. There on Facebook one can post prayer requests and responses to other posts. The page is called “Prayer Chapel Live” but there is no indication that there is a “live” experience via video input or instant messaging. In fact, the live Prayer Chapel has been discontinued as of August, 2010. The move of an interactive community to Facebook does, however, reflect the growing trend for involvement in social networking sites as a source of first-connection rather than seeking out a website as a portal for community

involvement. It also mirrors the research done by the Pew Research Center on social network use. The use of social networking sites by teens and young adults still exceeds use by older adults: “younger online adults are much more likely than their older counterparts to use social networks, with 75% of adults 18-24 using these networks, compared to just 7% of adults 65 and older. At its core, use of online social networks is still a phenomenon of the young.” Nonetheless, the use of social network sites by all adults has more than quadrupled from 2005 to 2009, increasing from 8% in 2005 to 35% in 2009. Social network sites are also attracting older adults now, with a jump from 4% of adults ages 74 and older using them in 2008 and now 16% networking in 2010.

Perhaps the move to Facebook was, for the UCC, a way to reach a broader and younger community while knowing that adults in general were increasing their use of social networking sites – though the number of user, originally 4,500 and now 247, does not indicate that this move has been successful.

While the i.ucc site is no longer in existence it can still prove to be a useful case study for the application of my proposed hermeneutical process for determining the ecclesiological viability of an online community. There are three parts to this process, each assessing an aspect of the website and its context: theology and tradition,


communication theory, and CMC. I will begin this evaluation with a specific look at the theology and tradition of the United Church of Christ.

Theology and Tradition

The United Church of Christ was formally inaugurated on June 25, 1957 with the merger of two denominations that were themselves the result of previous mergers: The Congregational Christian Churches (formed in 1931 from the merger of Congregational Churches and the Christian Church) and the Evangelical and Reformed Church (formed in 1934 with the merger of the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church in the United States). These two denominations represented the merging of a number of histories and concerns dating back to their European roots grounded in the Protestant Reformation. The Congregational Church carried forth the traditions of Puritan New England, and the Christian Church was established on the American frontier. They shared a concern for the freedom of religious expression and considered local autonomy to be an essential feature of their faith as well as their polity. The Evangelical Synod of North America was also a by-product of western expansion in the Mississippi Valley, composed of German-American believers. The Reformed Church in the United States was formed in 1793 out of a coalition of Reformed churches with both German and Swiss roots. These two communities united both Lutheran and Reformed theology and were frequently characterized by a strong piety and strict doctrinal convictions.
When these four groups came together in 1957 they brought to the table a wide variety of theologies, ecclesiologies, and traditions. It appears to many observers (both those inside and outside of the denomination) as if the United Church of Christ has no firm theological basis, leading to parodies on its name reflecting its perceived ambiguities, such as the “Untied Church of Christ” or “Unitarians Considering Christ.”

But Lee Barrett suggests that this is a misunderstanding of UCC history:

This caricature misdescribes the actual theological situation in the UCC. The problem with the UCC is not a paucity of theology, but is rather an embarrassment of theological riches. A kaleidoscopic superabundance of theology has characterized the UCC from its inception, generated by the irenic experiment of uniting four very different traditions and a multiplicity of "hidden histories."

Inspired partly by the Reformed view that God transcends all human efforts to formulate divine truth, the UCC has exhibited a commitment to the revelatory freedom of the Holy Spirit and has resisted the definition and enforcement of doctrine by a coercively authoritative ecclesial magisterium.32

Barrett goes on to note four distinct, though often overlapping, “theological worlds” within the UCC. The first noted is “The World of Estrangement and Reconciliation,” which he indicates is one of the strongest and most prominent of the theological worlds.

Karl Barth is a significant voice in this orientation, and it has been the favored language of representatives of the Evangelical Synod with its focus on the Word, its Christocentric theology, and its pietistic preferences. Many of the founding voices of within the UCC

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were from this world, which has left its mark on the language used in many of the
documents and statements in the early life of the UCC.\textsuperscript{33}

The second theological world is that of “Benevolence and Reform.” This world
was initially inhabited predominately by Congregationalists with the heritage of the
Social Gospel still strong. This theological world focused on the moral character of
Christians and the need to reform both the individual and society—which was a
possibility because of the benevolence of a loving God. While social action was a
dominant theme, this theological world also incorporated a strong connection to human
culture, an appreciation of human reason, and less inclination to pursue metaphysical
topics as other theological worlds might do.\textsuperscript{34}

The “World of Oppression and Liberation” is the third perceived theological
world within the UCC. While sharing many of the same concerns of the Social Gospel
supporters, this world focuses more on social justice and less on personal or social
spiritual transformation. Barrett goes on to say:

This orientation dramatically reconceptualized the understanding of the nature
and purpose of the church as an intentional community of transformative praxis.
Avoiding any suggestion of corporate Pelagianism, the church is envisioned as a
community of resistance and solidarity called forth by God out of nothing.
Differing somewhat from the view of the older liberals, the church in this view is
not so much God’s converted and inspired revolutionary elite as it is the loyal and
co-suffering companion of all genuinely emancipatory movements throughout the

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid. 76-82.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 82-87.
globe. The church provides material support and spiritual depth, courage, and hope to all who oppose injustice.\textsuperscript{35}

The fourth and final theological world within the UCC is “The World of Sin and Redemption.” This world is inhabited by the more conservative members of the UCC who uphold a high view of biblical authority, expect and demand an evangelical fervor, and seek to transform lives through faith and piety. This world is often in opposition to the social justice emphasis within the UCC, and feels that the UCC has misplaced its priorities.\textsuperscript{36}

Within these various theological worlds, and within the historical and theological contexts of each local congregation, the UCC developed three primary documents to identify the nature and purpose of the church: the Basis of Union (1943), the Constitution of the UCC, and the Statement of Faith. The Basis of Union and the Constitution were ratified by each congregation uniting with the UCC, while the Statement of Faith was voted on at the General Synod and only commended to the congregations (which gives it less authority; however, it is widely accepted within the UCC). The Basis of Union, which was a preliminary document about the possibilities of union, says of the church:

\begin{quote}
The faith which unites us and to which we bear witness is that faith in God which the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments set forth, which the ancient Church expressed in the ecumenical creeds, to which our own spiritual fathers gave utterance in the evangelical confessions of the Reformation, and which we are in duty bound to express in the words of our time as God Himself gives us light. In
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 91.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 92-94.
all our expressions of that faith we seek to preserve unity of heart and spirit with those who have gone before us as well as those who now labor with us.

...We acknowledge one holy catholic Church, the innumerable company of those who, in every age and nation, are united by the Holy Spirit to God in Christ, are one body in Christ, and have communion with Him and with one another. We hold the Church to be established for calling men to repentance and faith, for the public worship of God, for the confession of His name by word and deed, for the administration of the sacraments, for witnessing to the saving grace of God in Christ, for the upbuilding of the saints, and for the universal propagation of the Gospel; and in the power of the love of God in Christ we labor for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace, and the realization of human brotherhood.37

The Preamble to the Constitution of the UCC states it in a different way:

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession.
It looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world.
It claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.38

In addition, the Constitution makes a clear statement about the nature of relationships among churches:

ARTICLE III. COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS
6 Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has


responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God’s ways.\textsuperscript{39}

**ARTICLE V. LOCAL CHURCHES**

9 The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church.

10 A Local Church is composed of persons who, believing in God as heavenly Father, and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness.\textsuperscript{40}

What these few paragraphs indicate is the dynamic nature of the church as well as its commitment to God’s mission. While incorporating traditional language and images, these paragraphs also indicate the classic Reformed position of the ongoing work and revelation of the Holy Spirit. This is particularly evident in a choice of language which is open-ended and ambiguous. For example, the Preamble “affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God,” reflecting the Reformed commitment to ongoing evaluation and confessional formulation. Article III of the Constitution does not define the church precisely, but rather refers to “each expression of

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., Article III.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., Article V.
the church,” leaving the form and location of the church decidedly ambiguous. Even when the church is pronounced to be a “local” expression in Article V, it is not commending geographic location as much as affirming the autonomy of individual congregations within the universal church. Clyde Steckel summarizes the nature and purpose of the church in this way:

According to this founding ecclesiology the United Church of Christ, the church is called into being by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit; and the proper human response is to believe in and trust this good news and in that response to receive, among the gifts of faith, the gift of life in the covenant community of the church; and the life of the church, empowered by that same Spirit, is a gathered life of worship, community, education, and mutual care, along with a public life of the church where it proclaims the gospel, extends compassion and care, calls for justice and peace and works to achieve them.  

Based on these descriptions of the nature and purpose of the church in the UCC, it would seem that a case could be made for an online church—or at least that a case would not be precluded a priori. Most of the criteria mentioned can be found in online communities when the language used is non-spatial, such as “gathered life of worship,” “the various expressions of the United Church of Christ,” and “the responsibility of the Church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship” None of these statements would preclude an online community, and certainly an online community is public, can worship together (though some might take issue with this), uphold the historic faith, and organize for God’s mission.

Difficulties arise, however, when we come to two particular aspects of these descriptions. The first issue is the use of the word local. If local means geographic, an online church is impossible. If local is intended to mean an intentional gathering of believers, it need not be attached to a physical location. The theme of “local congregations” has been a part of the Reformed tradition for centuries, and the UCC builds upon that history. It has been used as a way to distinguish the congregational polity from a presbyterial system, and it has been used as a way to emphasize the commitment to autonomy in all things. How “local” is interpreted will have a great impact on the possibility of an online church.

The other aspect of the UCC descriptions of the nature and the purpose of the church which may preclude an online church is the inclusion of sacraments as a mark of the church. This is the traditional language of the Protestant reformers and it has endured throughout the Reformed tradition. If the sacraments must be shared physically in a particular geographic location, an online church will not be able to meet this criterion. A cyber-church may be able to gather its participants together to meet physically for this

42 The Cambridge Platform of 1648 focused on each autonomous congregation as the basic expression of church, while holding that local gathering as a part of the church universal. For example: “A Congregational-church, is by the institution of Christ a part of the Militant-visible-church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant, for the publick worship of God, & the mutuall edification one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus.” Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 205. This tone continues to be the basis of the UCC definition of church, which emphasizes the call of the Holy Spirit to form a community for public expression of the faith. For additional analysis of the role of the Cambridge Platform, and other early American confessions, in the history of the UCC, see Randi Jones Walker, *The Evolution of a UCC Style: Essays in the History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2005).
purpose, but that would not uphold the integrity and fullness of a cyber-church being a
distinctive ecclesial unit, whole unto itself. It may be possible to evoke other “theological
worlds” and traditions to shift the understanding of the sacraments to a less locally
embodied experience. The tradition of the priesthood of all believers could be utilized to
diminish the need for a clerical presence, thus allowing each believer to accept and
distribute the Eucharist. This would be a definite departure from traditional
understandings of the priesthood of all believers, but it is not without possibility and
precedent within the Reformed tradition.43 It would also enable a dispersed community
to share in the Eucharist together, since each participant would be authorized to act.
Another tradition embedded in the UCC that could be evoked is a more Zwinglian
interpretation of the Eucharist as a memorial meal. This does not avoid the necessity of
gathering physically in one place, but it may permit an online Eucharistic celebration by
shifting its emphasis from the physical substance of the meal to its memorial function.

Because of the incarnational aspects of the Eucharistic celebration and the
emphasis within the UCC upon the sacraments as a mark of the church to be shared in a
physically gathered community, the UCC would not be able to consider an online faith
community to be a church. This is apparent, I believe, in the language that was used to

43 See Chapter Four, fn. 77 for a discussion of Calvin’s position on the priesthood of believers. He
does not use this concept to conclude that ordained clergy are unnecessary, but his statements are
ambiguous enough to allow for a variety of interpretations. Thus, for example, many United Church of
Christ by-laws in local churches allow for any person to be elected as “spiritual director” as recommended
by the diaconate, usually in an emergency situation. For example: Article III.C. “This church may at any
meeting, upon the recommendation of the Diaconate, duly authorize a member of the Diaconate or other
such qualified individual to work as spiritual advisor.” From the Constitution and By-Laws of the
Richmond Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Richmond, MA (last revised 1994).
describe i.ucc. It never described itself as church, but rather as a people on a journey, a community of believers, and a gathering of the faithful. The i.ucc site did, on the other hand, offer a wealth of opportunities to participate in God’s mission, through a live prayer chapel, educational resources, forums for discussing a variety of topics, and numerous links to social justice opportunities. Despite its ability to host a lively community of faith, i.ucc was ultimately unable to meet the explicit requirement within the UCC for sacramental participation.

*Communication Theory*

The i.ucc website is very successful at expressing its narrative identity. It does this by upholding its commitments to open inquiry and a willingness to allow for doubts. It repeats in many different ways the commitment to a dynamic sense of revelation and interpretive possibility based on the work of the Holy Spirit (God is Still Speaking). In service of this willingness to ask questions, the website included a range of resources enabling seekers or long-term believers to access the history and traditions of the UCC while providing a forum in which to discuss and practice the Christian life. This reflects the dual commitments of the UCC to an educated and discerning community as well as being a community that lives out its faith through intentional practices. Thus, the website includes ways in which to study the Bible, to pray, to listen to music, to learn traditional spiritual practices, and to connect with the world through service projects, fundraising, and political action.
The narrative, or worldview, which the UCC inhabits, is represented thoroughly on the i.ucc website in its dedication to Scripture and history while seeking to engage participants by offering a variety of experiences and interpretations which are part of the variegated history of the UCC. Because there are so many strands of interpretation and experience converging in the UCC, the opportunity to explore them all is a respectful way to honor the similarities as well as the divergences and disagreements within the UCC. For some this is problematic. Even people within the UCC can find it difficult to accept the lack of stability and unwillingness to commit to more than basic affirmations of faith. However, the denomination’s founding documents do not indicate a lack of depth as much as a return to early Reformed confessional style that sought to emphasize that which was considered scripturally sound. In addition, the variety of resources available on the site, drawing from historic traditions, doctrines, and experiences, suggests an appreciation of history rather than a refusal to adhere consistently to one interpretation alone.

While the narrative aspect of UCC Christian identity was faithfully transmitted, the nurture of an interpretive community was also accomplished. In the case of i.ucc, it was directed by denominational staff, which gave it a firm grounding in accepted denominational views and interests. In addition, the discussion forums and live prayer chapel were staffed by lay and ordained members of the UCC from around the country,

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44 See pages 324-325 for the most basic, and most stable, statements of faith shared within the UCC through the Basis of Union and the Preamble to the Constitution.
giving it a distinctly broader range of interpretations than would have emerged if it had been solely managed by denominational staff. A variety of voices were available for those who sought them. As an interpretive community, therefore, i.ucc was very successful at integrating a range of participants as they experienced the community and theologies of the UCC.

The interpretive possibilities of Speech Act Theory as a way to analyze message content and its potential impact can be used as an important tool in constructing effective websites. I noted in Chapter Six (page 257) that there were three potential benefits to applying Speech Act Theory to websites: first, the focus on the action of words and images emphasizes the interaction between speaker and listener/reader and the necessity of offering clear, understandable, and meaningful messages; secondly, it serves to focus message composition on the intended community so that the messages “speak the same language” as the audience; and finally, verbal exchanges—particularly in relationship to the sacraments—may be seriously impacted based on the understanding of the power and efficacy of speech acts.  

The depth of the message construction and the application of Speech Act Theory is only minimally apparent in Figures 1.1-3. The words used on the homepage are used

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Because i.ucc did not offer the sacraments as part of its community, I am unable to consider this third aspect of Speech-Act Theory thoroughly. However, for an example of an online faith community where Speech-Act Theory might be an effective hermeneutical tool in this regard, see the web church of the Disciples of Christ and their service of the Eucharist at http://www.disciplesnet.org/.
\item To see additional webpages for i.ucc during its existence, September 2006 through June 2010, go to Internet Archives and type in i.ucc.org (http://www.archive.org/, accessed on March 30, 2011).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
imperatively: interact, gather, subscribe, follow, stretch, feed, live. They offer a bold invitation to act, and the intent to engage the reader seems obvious. The masthead, “God is still speaking,” also offers a declarative statement announcing a common UCC (and Reformed) theme of the ongoing work of the Spirit. On other pages the message of an open and dynamic church is used in a slightly different manner: as an invitation to participate even if you do not fit in. “A community for you, just as you are” is a frequent sidebar on other pages, particularly the ones that focus on teaching the history and theology found within the UCC. The words used, in addition to being imperative, are aimed at engaging people who have doubts and questions and are searching for a spiritual home. This approach is consistent with the UCC’s confessional tradition that does not mandate confessions of faith but invites the affirmation of statements of faith.

While not refusing to use religious imagery on its homepage, i.ucc does not use much imagery or wording that would alienate a questioner. There is the UCC logo on the top left of the page, and the word “Bible” is used three times on the homepage, but the other spiritual words used are more neutral: spirit, prayer, chapel. This would indicate to a viewer that the site, though religious, is gently invitational and not intended to shut down possible seekers by presenting a fixed and permanent set of beliefs required of all participants. The intended audience, while clearly hoping to appeal to UCC participants,

47 The UCC’s God is Still Speaking campaign used a quotation from Gracie Allen for many years: “Never Place a period where God has placed a comma.”
is also looking for younger people who feel spiritually lost. The technology this site embraces and supports are not generally the technologies of early baby-boomers or their predecessors. In making these choices, of technologies and language, i.ucc claimed a very particular audience: young people on a spiritual journey with inquiring minds and a desire for an open and affirming community where everyone can find a place.

Computer-Mediated Communication

I have suggested two important CMC theories as ways to assess the ecclesiology of an online church: netizenship and the Religious-Social Shaping of Technology. Netizenship is a set of six criteria for recognizing an online community: interactivity, stability of membership, stability of identity, netizenship, personal concern for others, and shared experience. Each of these criteria had been met on i.ucc based on a series of rules for mutual behavior, accountability, and the requirement to “log in” to participate. While anyone could visit the site, only those who had taken the time and effort to set up an account could actually post comments in the forums or participate in the prayer chapel. Interactivity was available in a number of formats, including chat sessions, a blackboard system for posting messages, both video and audio capabilities, and an opportunity for group interaction in the form of discussion, shared links and resources, and shared worship experiences. It is difficult to assess the stability of identity, but by requiring people to log-in, an effort is being made to establish accountability. Based on this CMC criterion for community participation and interactivity, i.ucc scored high as a potential ecclesial community.
The Religious-Social Shaping of Technology (RSST) offers a very different way to analyze the use of CMC within a religious community. Whereas CMC theories often look at the “computer” side of the relationship, RSST seeks to combine the particular technology with the religious history and context of the community under discussion. Thus, RSST would take the use of CMC and compare it to prior uses of technology within the UCC, looking for definitive moments, theological pronouncements, and the shifting of interpretation as the community decides how to use this particular technology, if at all.

Within the UCC context, this will demand a review of the relationship of not only the UCC but the larger Reformed tradition and CMC. Much of this history has been addressed in earlier chapters of this dissertation, acknowledging the unavoidable intermingling of communication and faith with each new technological invention. Within these tangled relationships are some questions that will help in discerning the relationship of the UCC to CMC:

- What has been the Reformed tradition’s relationship to other technological innovations, such as the printing press, telegraph, film, and television?
- How has the UCC incorporated communication technologies into its life and mission in prior circumstances? Have emerging technologies been used to proclaim the gospel, evangelize, uphold and support the faithful, strive for social justice, or otherwise further the agenda of the UCC?
Has the UCC taken a firm stand on the use of electronic media and the issues of access, privilege, and the dehumanizing potential of electronic overload?

In its stated mission to make the word fresh for each generation, has CMC been incorporated as a function or a goal, and in what ways?

Questions such as these will need to be researched and addressed in the same manner that the nature and purpose of the church was reviewed, using historical documents and denominational pronouncements as a way to access the relationship of the UCC to CMC not only at the denominational level but also at the local church level. As indicated earlier, the UCC is a combination of four different historical denominations and continues to reflect a wide variety of experience and understanding which will make any hope of uniformity of opinion unlikely but will hopefully foment a lively discussion about the use of CMC.

RSST as a process for identifying and developing the ongoing relationship of the UCC to technology is perhaps the key component of the hermeneutical process suggested here, for it draws together the various strands of theology, tradition, communication, and technology. While its emphasis is clearly focused on the relationship to technology, RSST also requires a familiarity with the community seeking to understand the cyber-church. While not a process that guarantees an answer to the question “can the church be the church online,” it certainly provides direction and content for historical analysis.

**Conclusion**

A commitment to an ongoing hermeneutical process of evaluation and discernment will be required to accept the historical premises and characteristics inherent in the establishment of a cyber-church. If a cyber-church emerges, it simply will not look like church looked in the past. The call to remember the plurality of ecclesioologies in the
New Testament is pertinent in this situation, as is the reminder to let the Holy Spirit work freely. It is also imperative to keep an open mind to new ways of thinking about traditional topics, introducing new configurations of thought and form that are derived from our theological heritage but that have been subjected to a new process of discernment. If we can do that I believe a virtual ecclesiology may be identifiable, and will in time be an important part of maintaining a community committed to Christ. Having said that, I must also note the pervasive concerns the idea of cyber-church evokes. For a great many people it will be difficult to see the incarnational aspects of a faithful life conducted online.

Though I was not able to coax the UCC website i.ucc into being a church faithful to the UCC understanding of the nature and purpose of the church, I believe that there are abundant resources available to sustain the question and to support ongoing consideration of the ecclesiological viability of an online church as technology continues to evolve. Drawing upon definitions of church which emphasize the role of faith, mission, and discipleship rather than form, I return to the definitions of church offered by Haight: “the church is the historical community of the disciples of Jesus animated by God as Spirit whose goal is to continue and expand Jesus’ message in history,” and Russell: “[church is] a community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome.” These definitions establish a definition of the church that is focused on its function in the world rather than upon form or location, for they are focused on lived religion as it is found in a community gathered by the Spirit. These definitions are not so much interested in the
nature or form of the church as an abstract or idealized vision, but are rather committed to the purpose of the church in the world.

Just as non-traditional examples of ecclesial communities have developed throughout history (such as monastic communities, the house-church movement, and neo-monasticism), an online church may emerge from the traditional marks of the church and a reconsideration of theology and tradition. In this sense, I believe an online church will share many of the characteristics of the missional church, particularly in its move away from traditional forms of polity and the geographic limitations associated with conventional physical faith communities, as well as by its affirmation of dynamism and the ongoing appropriation of the Gospel in diverse ways. In addition to the missional church as a way to look at emerging ecclesial communities, another possible model is the Base Christian Community (BCC). It is not so much their particular forms that reflect possibilities for the online church, but rather their reason for being. As Boff says, “The history of the church is not merely the history of the actualization of ancient forms or of a return to the pristine experiences of the historical past. The history of the church is genuine history: the creation of never-before-experienced novelty.”

48 He refers to BCC’s as developing from the bottom-up (15); they will include different levels of involvement and exist in different types of community (33), and they will develop from within, reflecting a decentralized concept of power rather than a hierarchal form (60). BCC’s are

48 Boff, 2; all subsequent references to this book will be listed in the text of the paper, using parentheses.
also known for their focus on mission, their commitment to contextuality, the search for relationality and communion with the Holy Spirit, and for “challenging the Christian churches to new ways of being and living church and new ways of ministry and service.”

Though BCC’s may be small communities in their traditional form, they provide a model for community that encourages involvement in a committed way with new channels of expression.

In more recent writing, Volf suggests that “congregationalization” is the wave of the future. This new form of church advocates a bottom-up approach to authority, a Free Church polity similar to congregationalism, a valuation of participation and interaction among all members of the community, and a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit. Volf locates this shift to congregationalism in a renewed understanding of the gathering of believers and their unifying principles. First, a church is a gathering of people called forth in Jesus’ name (Matthew 18:20). What is essential here is that they are called by the Holy Spirit and are called with the purpose of following Jesus. He goes on to say that “Doubtless, however, the life of the church is not exhausted in the act of assembly. Even


50 Miroslav Volf, After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 11-14. Volf quotes Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as identifying this shift in ecclesiological form: “My impression is that the authentically Catholic meaning of the reality “Church” is tacitly disappearing, without being expressly rejected... In other words, in many ways a conception of Church is spreading in Catholic thought, and even in Catholic theology, that cannot even be called Protestant in a “classic” sense. Many current ecclesiological ideas, rather, correspond more to the model of certain North American “Free Churches.” (p. 12). See also Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe “’A Company of Professed Believers Ecclesiastically Confederate’: the message of the Cambridge Platform,” under “Beliefs” at http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/theology/a-company-of-professed.html (accessed on March 6, 2011).
if a church is not assembled, it does live on as a church in the mutual service its members render to one another and in its common mission to the world.”\textsuperscript{51} Volf goes on to identify two conditions of ecclesiality that make an assembly a church: faith and commitment to Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{52}

Whether considering Volf’s suggestion of the congregationalization of the church, or the dispersed model of missional communities or BCC’s, each bends tradition in new ways to accommodate contemporary context. While they are not restricting their form or message by the constraints of a particular medium, these new forms of church do acknowledge the changing way in which the Gospel is mediated. The Word of God has always been mediated to the world. Jesus Christ is the ultimate mediator, of course, but the Christian tradition acknowledges other mediations as well, including writing, serving, supporting, preaching, and teaching. Each in its own way seeks to convey the grace of God and the power of God’s love. The form of mediation is a vehicle for revelation, and so the form of mediation is not necessarily attached to a particular, or permanent, mode or tradition. CMC is simply one of the most recent innovations in a long history of technological mediations, which is but one way to encounter God. But the ability to see this as an ecclesiological possibility demands a reformulation of the questions we originally asked; a reclamation and renewal of terms, definitions, and categories in our

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 137; Volf would most likely discourage considering this as a possible foundation for a virtual church. He is very much in support of the physical gathering of a community in a geographic location.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 147
language, practices, and traditions; a willingness to reassess our personal and communal Christian relationships by the same standards we are imposing on the virtual church; and an ability to “let go” long enough for the spirit to move us in new directions.

On the other hand, no amount of reformulation and innovative technology can make a website something it is not. As evidenced by my analysis of the UCC site i.ucc, theological and historical understandings of the nature and purpose of the church were not able to be twisted in order to create a cyber-church. Within the UCC, despite a plethora of theological histories, obscure or neglected doctrines, and a commitment to dynamic proclamation and witness, the emphasis on the incarnational experience of the Eucharist as the reception of God’s gift to us and our giving graciously to others could not be replicated in a virtual community.

I suggest that the search for an ecclesiology of online communities may in itself be a misguided exercise. I say this because with the abundance of ecclesial forms and structures, traditions and histories available to us there may be no one, distinct, definitive definition of a cyber-church to be found, even within a particular denomination. In fact, I contend that the future will hold out to us a hybrid church which melds and incorporates a variety of traditions and forms. With our current reliance on a dichotomous approach to categories and experiences, we define things as good or bad, all or nothing, yes or no. A hybrid church would challenge us by setting up a permanent dialectical challenge to find the nature and purpose of the church in more than one place at one time. For example, Eucharistic celebrations may occur in a physical church, prayer life may be most vibrant
on a blog or in a chatroom, and mission may be navigated through Internet links that
direct committed Christians to the locations they will serve best.

The work of the Spirit could be moving the church to vibrant new expressions of
being, which may or may not lead to a cyber-church and may be dispersed through a
variety of media, both virtual and physical. The validity of each assembly of believers
must ultimately be grounded in the purpose of the church, which is found in Scripture,
ancient creeds, and contemporary expressions alike. A very American expression of the
purpose of the church is located in the Cambridge Platform of 1648, and may be as good
a place as any to ground an understanding of the nature and purpose of the church in the
North American context: “A Congregational-church, is by the institution of Christ a part
of the Militant-visible-church, consisting of a company of Saints by calling, united into
one body, by a holy covenant, for the publick worship of God, & the mutuall edification
one of another, in the Fellowship of the Lord Jesus.”\footnote{See fn.42} Drawing upon the marks of the
church, the shift to less hierarchical polity, and an acknowledgement of our call from God
into community to serve and worship God publicly, this 350 year old confession of faith
may still be a viable lens through which to search for viable ecclesial communities.

Thus, to discern the work of the Spirit we must remain open to the unexpected,
which may not mean a radical acceptance of new technologies and virtual worlds. It will
serve us well to reassess our many traditions and honored criteria for ecclesiology,
including things that were once fundamental truths: geographic location, body/mind

\footnote{See fn.42}
dualisms, synchronous time, spatial embodiment, ecclesial control, and Truth. We may need to supplement these categories with a new sense of pluralism, fluidity, liminality, relationality, social networking, and trust. We must acknowledge the multitude of diverse communities available to meet spiritual and physical needs, admitting that affiliation and allegiance to only one community may be an adiaphora – a non-essential byproduct of traditional practices and not conducive to knowing God fully. We will also need to renew the gift of discernment that permitted early reformers to write and re-write confessional statements to reflect the local and the particular, expressing the reality that revelation is both dynamic and contextual. By submitting our communities to a hermeneutical process honoring theology, communication theory, and CMC, I believe a new sense of identity and commitment to our Christian narrative and its myriad traditions can be revived and revised to fit the North American context of the twenty-first century.

But can we trust a virtual church? Can we trust its ability to move with the Holy Spirit? Can we have the faith to allow the Spirit to work as it will, rather than as we will have it? For example, in a position of total abandon to the possibilities of postmodernism, consider the idea that virtual reality is the Kingdom of God. Think of it: virtuality is that which seeks to be real… but isn’t quite yet. The virtual is that now/not yet moment where the Kingdom of God is breaking into our established world in new and unexpected ways. Virtual reality is a space that becomes more real as we inhabit it, claim it, and make it a home of lived faith. Virtual reality and CMC have become, simply, the newest way in which the Word is mediated to us as a participatory and interactive form of
incarnation that is both visible and invisible, and which can be focused upon the mission of the church as a transformative community seeking to live and act as signs of God’s Kingdom in all possible worlds.

Roger Haight asks: “By what stretch of the imagination can one choose the church of Carthage in the mid-third century to represent the whole church?” If his question is legitimate, than we are surely asking the wrong question in asking if the church can be the church online. Rather, we need to ask how the church is the church online and just how the Kingdom of God is breaking into our world anew, moving our virtual realities into a reality that speaks of an old reality in a new way.

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54 Haight, 12.
Figure 1.1. i.ucc, Homepage, part one
Beginning July 1, the i.UCC community will no longer be active. Our most popular resources, including the Daily Devotional, Weekly Seeds and our real-time Prayer Chapel, will continue to be available at the UCC’s website at www.ucc.org. See you there!

Prayer Chapel
Weekly Seeds
Daily Devotional

God is still speaking, i.UCC
United Church of Christ

What's New
- Our new location for Weekly Seeds!
- Daily Bible Reading and Devotional
- Real-time Prayer Chapel at 12 noon (Eastern), Monday-Friday, join our daily prayer time at 9 p.m. (Eastern)
- New bible bookmarks for Daily Readings!
- How do we read the Bible in the UCC?
- This Week’s Bible Blog
- Your church is invited to join Prayer Chapel Partners
- Web add for your church.

INTERACT in our forums
GATHER in our real-time prayer chapel
SUBSCRIBE to our free email meditation
Figure 2.1 LifeChurch.tv, Homepage
Figure 2.2. LifeChurch.tv, Church Online Homepage, part one
It seems like everyone, regardless of experience or expertise has opinions on topics ranging from church, sports, leadership, theology, politics, technology and more. I love the social interaction and relationships that can happen over conversations on those topics and passions. But I feel like we can be so overstimulated with the sound of our own “voice” we get this passive and egotistical spirit that just wants to be life’s armchair quarterback and we never get in the game.

This observation has me more excited to “get in the game” than ever before. I don’t want this “voice” into the world that God has given me to echo hollow because I only express it online and never really care enough to do something about it every day.

I don’t want to spend my time talking about ministry or leadership, I just want to live a ministry and lead. I don’t want to talk about methods to grow in faith, I want to put them in action as I grow in community. I want to get messy and then share experiences instead of casting thoughts and opinions from a safe and reasonable distance.
Figure 2.4. LifeChurch.tv, Church Online Homepage, part three
in your Song Jesus....

Today I had the privilege of praying for a church online friend on Facebook. While we were praying through hard times and just plain time praying in the chat room.

We pray those things in the name of your son Jesus, Amen.

I begged back and thought about Jesus being the way of hope to the world. With Jesus in your heart and the Holy Spirit in your life, I thought about how there are songs that just get stuck in your head. The song you are humming it and tapping fingers and feet to all day long.

I want my relationship with Jesus to be like that a song! I can’t get out of my head. A rhythm that is humming in your heart and tapping your feet to it.

What about Jesus has your heart singing today?

What prayers are humming in your heart?

What calling has your feet tapping with excitement?
Figure 2.6. LifeChurch.tv, Church Online Homepage, part five
Figure 2.7. LifeChurch.tv, Church Online Homepage, part six
Digital Missionary

by Amanda Sims on August 24, 2009

Many Christians have heard tales of missionaries who travel to far-off lands for months or years at a time to take the Gospel to the corners of the earth. Hearing these inspiring stories has often made me wonder what more I could do to tell the story of Jesus to people in other countries. When I was younger, I got the chance to serve with missionary teams in Germany. Those times were truly life-changing for me, as I got to see God move in the lives of people on the other side of the world.

You may not be able to be on the mission field on international soil, but Church Online provides a way for you to be a “digital missionary” to people across the globe. Every Church Online experience is an opportunity for people around the world to encounter God’s love and truth. We’ve had residents of 180 different countries participate in Church Online experiences. You can’t get much more global than that!

I’d like to invite YOU to consider being a “digital missionary” by joining an experience team as a Church Online volunteer. To find out more, take a look at our Serve Page at http://internet.lifechurch.tv/serve/ to find out more about how you can serve Jesus, His Church and the World by partnering with us to share the Gospel.
And if you are already a “digital missionary” with Church Online, tell us about it! What is it that gets you excited about reaching the nations this way?

1 comment

Remember

By BRANDON DONALDSON on AUGUST 25, 2009

This week we have been sharing communion at Church Online. Remembering is an important part of our lives as followers of Christ. Did you know that? In Deuteronomy, you can see this theme of remembering. Israel was given the passover to remember that God delivered them from Egypt. Every time the children would take passover they would hear the whole story of how God delivered their people out of slavery.

Then Jesus used the last passover meal with his disciples to setup what we call communion today. This was to remember his death. Remember that there was an unbelievable price paid on our behalf. Every day we follow Jesus and pray to a holy God, it is only made possible by incredible sacrifice and suffering. Don’t miss out on the power of memory. Take time and remember what Jesus did for you. Read of his suffering and sacrifice. Let it move you to tears. Let it remind you of God’s great love for you!

Look back and REMEMBER so you can be REMINDED of why you truly lived!

1 comment

PREVIOUS ENTRIES
Figure 3.1. Friday Study Ministries, Homepage
Figure 3.2. Friday Study Ministries, Weekly Bulletin
Welcome to the Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua (VCBD): This is a sacred place in cyberspace named after a little old dog with cataracts, who barked sideways at strangers, because he couldn't see where they were. We humans relate to God in the same way, making a more or less joyful noise in God's general direction, and expecting a reward for doing so. Hence our creed:

We can't be right about everything we believe.
Thank God, we don't have to be!

We are dedicated to enlarging religion as a source of inspiration and diminishing religion as a source of conflict in the world. This means we each practice the religion (or none) to which we are called, and we help each other do likewise. We do this because we admit that, like the little Blind Chihuahua, none of us gets our religion exactly right*, and we want to learn from each other. We invite all people of good will to participate, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, etc. We even welcome moral relativists, although we think they have taken more from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil than they admit. If you are put off by the usual approaches to religion or are leaving Fundamentalism, this site may be for you.

Our Guiding Principles are that Science is about Facts, Religion is about Meaning, and Humor is about Us. We adopt them because we think many conflicts are started by people who take themselves too seriously, who manufacture meaning from ideals of their imaginations, and who try to force others to accept that meaning as fact.

So, come in. Refresh yourself from our bin for donations of canned theology to feed the poor in spirit. Then arm yourself, as we do, with the Courage to be Ridiculous before God™ and explore VCBD. Here are some hints:
Figure 4.2. Church of the Blind Chihuahua, Homepage, part two
Figure 5.1. St. Pixels, Homepage, part one
Figure 5.2. St. Pixels, Homepage, part two
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