

Red Herrings and Relevance: are we asking the wrong questions?

An address delivered by Jamie Howison at the Canadian Church Press Conference
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Though I began thinking about this address – and doing a fair amount of reading related to it – in the mid-Winter, the actual writing of it took place just a couple of weeks back during a writing retreat I was able to take at The Collegeville Institute at St John's Abbey in Minnesota. In part I tell you this to place at least some of my cards openly on the table: given my druthers, the best place to do a bit of sustained writing and thinking is at a retreat centre run by Benedictine monks. That probably already says something about my biases.

I also share this, so that I can tell you a bit about the 11 hours I spent on the bus getting from Winnipeg to Collegeville. In my carry-on bag were stowed the things that for me are essential for that kind of a trip: my daily office prayer book; a magazine with articles long enough that you need to use a bookmark; a book that I can read without pen in hand (in other words, something that I won't be marking up with underlining and margin notes); and my little MP3 player, loaded up with jazz music and podcasts.

The book I'd chosen to read was *An Infinity of Little Hours* by Nancy Klein Maguire; a chronicling of the lives of five young men who, in the early 1960's, chose to enter a Carthusian monastery to test their vocations in what is widely regarded as the Western church's most austere and demanding monastic order. Carthusians spend the bulk of their lives living as hermits in their cells, emerging only for liturgy in the chapel, for one weekly common meal - in silence - and for one weekly recreational walk. They are utterly removed from the world; they never see a newspaper, never watch television, never tune in a radio, and have only very limited contact with family and friends through the mail. Even now, given the modest reforms brought about through the Second Vatican Council, this separation remains. While they do maintain a web presence, you will not be able to add a Carthusian monk to your list of Facebook friends, because aside from the monk assigned to maintaining the website, a Carthusian simply would not be surfing the 'net.

So, I'm reading this account of separation from society – a separation made for the purpose of moving ever deeper into God – and I'm finding in it something very appealing, very powerful, and then when my eyes get tired of reading on the bumpy bus, I switch on my MP3 player and listen to an NPR podcast about the musical and personal vision of the jazz great John Coltrane.

As if that weren't enough to make me feel as if I'm in a space between two worlds – between bookish monks and podcast jazz - over the course of the long bus ride I begin to take stock of my fellow passengers. I'm aware, for instance, that of the twenty or so people on board, I'm one of the very few who is reading. That alone stuns me; I simply cannot imagine striking out on a journey without a book. I can't. There are several people plugged into iPods and the like, and a surprising number who pass a fair bit of the

time talking on their cell phones. Some pass the time in conversation with traveling partners, others attempt to strike up conversations with people they've just met, many doze on and off... but it is pretty clear that on this ride personal electronic devices have trumped the printed word.

Here's something else of which I became aware on this trip. During our rest stop in Pembina, North Dakota, I spoke briefly with two young travelers; one a young woman on her way home to Iowa City, having spent the past few weeks in Winnipeg visiting her boyfriend; the other a young man, in the midst of a long journey home from Edmonton to Kalamazoo, Michigan. His reason for having been in Edmonton? To spend time with his girlfriend. Thanks to connecting on the internet, both of these people were in long-distance cross-border relationships, something quite unimaginable just twenty years ago.

The truth is that my bus was something of a slice cut from the social world in which we live. If we, as church people and specifically church *media* people, want to ask questions about how best to communicate our various messages, we have to keep that in view. Those travelers on that bus aren't representative of the whole of our social world – there are other slices, so to speak – but neither are they some social anomaly.

In spite of the fact that book sales in Canada actually rose from 2007 to 2008 – whereas in both the UK and the United States they fell – the weekly hours the average Canadian adult below the age of 50 spends watching TV is still astonishing: according to BBM Neilson Media Research, in 2007/08 it was 23.8 hours. A week. Almost a seventh of the total hours of any given week, in front of the television. The most recent available Statistics Canada figures are from 2004, and they offer a slightly more modest figure of 21.4 hours per week, with children and teens watching less than adults – 14.1 and 12.9 hours respectively – though since then YouTube and other sources of online television and video will have shifted the way that hours of viewing are tracked and calculated. Add to that the hours the average Canadian adult computer user spends online each week – by one study, in 2006 it was 9 hours a week – and you really begin to wonder when it is that Canadians are reading all of those books we've purchased.

I can't tell you if the two young people in those long-distance relationships met their online partners through Facebook, but they are very much a part of what the "Going Barefoot II"¹ conference organizers identify as "the Facebook generation." I am aware, though, that while not all users of online social networking sites fit neatly into an age demographic - according to a recent Ipsos Reid poll, 29% of all internet-connected Canadian adults have placed a profile on at least one internet social networking site – people under 30 would seem to be particularly committed to this method of interacting. And among all online social network users in Canada, Facebook users spend the most time using the site each week - an average of 5.9 hours.

That figure of 5.9 hours is probably quite low for Facebook's biggest users; youth and young adults. In a piece in *The Christian Century*, a 19 year old college student casually

¹ The 2009 Canadian Church Press Conference shared in the one day conference "Going Barefoot II: Reaching the Facebook Generation" offered by the Canadian Mennonite University on May 15, 2009.

reported daily use of 3 hours, with more on weekends.² Interestingly, this was in the context of an article on the phenomena of the Lenten social networking “fast”; an article which reported that thousands of Facebook users had joined “Giving up Facebook for Lent” groups on the site. In the same article, the following was reported:

In Italy, for instance, bishops are urging Catholics to do without an array of electronic appliances, including iPods and devices to send text messages, according to Associated Press. “It’s a small way to remember the importance of concrete and not virtual relationships,” suggested the Modena diocese.³

This contrasting of concrete and virtual relationships is a significant one. I find it ironic that a site on which the only “face” you show is the one you’ve chosen to show is called Facebook. You can in fact be rather faceless; you can join the site under an assumed name; you can post whatever doctored up version of your face you want, or no face at all. And then, you begin to accumulate “friends.” Really? I heard a piece on CBC, in which a commentator spoke of how, coming up to his birthday, he had decided to send an open invitation to all of his Facebook friends to join him for a celebration at a local pub. Of his seventy or so “friends”, several responded enthusiastically to his invitation, indicating that they’d try to be there. When the actual day arrived, none of them showed. That’s a long, long way from Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel according to John that, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13), or the rather striking line from Aelred of Rievaulx, based on his reading of 1 John, that “God is friendship.”⁴ There is a growing body of literature, in both philosophy and theology, on friendship and on how it was regarded as a high calling in the pre-modern world... and that has nothing to do with what Facebook calls “friends.”

That’s a bit of a curmudgeonly rant, so I’ll steer us back on course. Given the statistics I just offered, and given all that I experienced on my bus trip, if we’re good strategic thinkers and planners, we might begin to ask the question, “How do we address people who are increasingly living such a reality?” How can the church connect with, and reach out to, the “Facebook Generation”, to say nothing of those of all ages whose default settings for receiving information and communication are now set to online and televised media?

But is this the right question to be asking, or asking first? And behind that question of how we might connect or reach out, is there another question lurking? The one we really want to ask? How can we increase our circulation/readership/constituency? Is that the real question that is quietly, or maybe not so quietly, driving us?

The textures here will differ a bit, depending on whether you’re a denominational publication – The *Presbyterian Record* or maybe the *MB Herald* – a publication of a parachurch organization – the *Canadian Gideon* or World Vision’s *Childview* – one of

² “Giving up online social networks for Lent?” *The Christian Century*, April 7, 2009, Vol. 126 No. 7, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, Book 1:69-70 (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p. 65.

the non-denominational publications – *Christian Week* or *Faith Today* – or one of the many publications coming out of a Roman Catholic context. But whichever you are, don't tell me that you don't look at your circulation numbers, and don't tell me that you aren't concerned if, year after year, they are in decline. And if you run some form of an online version of your publication, surely you check your stats counter, to see how many hits you've had, and even where they're coming from? I do, on our church site. I'm not even sure why; it might just be the sin of pride, but I do check, and I do like it when the numbers are high.

Do you know what a red herring is? According to Wikipedia – yes, I went to Wikipedia for this... my *Oxford English Dictionary* was at home in the study! – a red herring is a logical fallacy launched as a deliberate attempt to change a subject or divert an argument. The term comes from a 19th century story by William Cobbett, in which he claimed that as a boy he used a cured and salted herring to mislead hounds following a trail.

Well, I think that a red herring or two have been tossed our way, diverting us from the trail and chasing a scent that has fooled us into thinking we're actually on the right track. One of those red herrings is that thing called circulation – readership, “hits”, subscribers, numbers – and the other, to which I will speak a bit further on in this address, is that thing called relevance.

On the question of numbers and circulation, a parallel question pops up all the time in the life of the church, at the local, regional and national levels. The board or council sits agonizing over the budget, wondering how to increase income. At the level of the local parish church, I've sat in meetings and looked at possible fund-raisers, stewardship campaigns, and ways to increase the pool of givers by “putting more bums in the pews.” Then you get the appeal campaigns from “head office,” and new formulas for soliciting support from the local to the regional and from the regional to the national; variations on the same theme. But have we stopped and asked the question that most needs to be asked, namely “why?” “To what end do we want to increase our income, our numbers?” Is it possible that this way of doing things – this structure, this approach, this model – has either lost its way or simply run its course, and is now in institutional survival mode? “This church has been part of this area for over 100 years; of course it should continue... right?” Or, “we've been publishing a version of what is now the *Anglican Journal* since 1875; it is an institution of the Anglican Church of Canada; of course it should continue... right?”

But again, can we pick up the scent of the right question – the fox we really should be tracking – which is the question of “why” or “to what end?” Bluntly put, is the continuing existence of the publications which all of you represent a self-evident good in the work and life and economy of the Kingdom of God?

I want to read to you an excerpt from a book written by a pastor to pastors:

It is bitterly disappointing to enter a room full of people whom you have every reason to expect share the quest and commitments of pastoral work and find

within ten minutes that they most definitely do not. They talk of images and statistics. They drop names. They discuss influence and status. Matters of God and the soul and Scripture are not grist for their mills.

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns – how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.

Some of them are very good shopkeepers. They attract a lot of customers, pull in great sums of money, develop splendid reputations. Yet it is still shopkeeping; religious shopkeeping, to be sure, but shopkeeping all the same.⁵

That comes from a book published in 1987, before the proliferation of the mega-church, before Willow Creek had launched the seeker church movement, before the whole Emergent phenomena. It is from Eugene Peterson's *Working the Angles*; gentle Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message* and inveterate introvert, who becomes a raging storm whenever he writes on these matters. Fifteen years later, the storm had not diminished when, in *The Unnecessary Pastor*, he wrote:

I have been dismayed by the widespread defection of many of my friends into officiating over Baal shrines and Ashteroth groves – this incredible revival of old Canaanite religion on the North American continent. You would have thought that men and women who had their heads full of Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah would have been proof against a religion that was designed to meet the needs of people as the people understood them, appealing to their pride, nurturing their greed, and providing escapist fantasies that incapacitate them from faithful and committed relationships and work.⁶

“Men and women who had their heads full of Elijah and Isaiah and Jeremiah” should know better, right? I mean, if those are the sorts of figures who form our imaginations, how could clergy possibly chase the scent of the red herring of success and raw growth? But our imaginations are less formed by those biblical prophets than by what Thomas Beaudoin calls “theocapitalism,” by which he means the frankly religious grip that consumer media capitalism exercises on our minds and our hearts.⁷ The philosopher Albert Borgmann, writing of what he names “the parasitic vacuity at the center of the technological culture,”⁸ claims that we – all of us in this culture and society – have come to a point where, “Engagement with the world has been yielding to the consumption of

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), pp. 1-2.

⁶ Eugene Peterson and Marva Dawn, *The Unnecessary Pastor* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing and Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000), p. 11).

⁷ Thomas M. Beaudoin, “Celebrity Deathmatch: The Church Versus Capitalism?” in *Proclaiming the Gospel in a Wired World: the 2001 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2001), p. 6ff.

⁸ Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), p. 22.

news and entertainment commodities;”⁹ that less and less do we engage the world in a critically meaningful way, turning instead to consume what is offered up...always at a price.

But what does this have to do with you, as members of the Canadian Church Press? Peterson is addressing pastors, while Borgmann and Beaudoin have Western society in their sights. You’re not pastors, and you’re certainly not about to presume to change the very fabric of Western culture; why am I bothering you with this?

Well, partly because Peterson’s discontent with his pastoral colleagues is rooted in a discontent with the church, and you are all part of the church. Yes, you are publishers and editors and journalists, but you are not merely that. Some of you may have editorial independence from your respective denominations, and some represent publications which are independent in their own right. You may well have embraced such independence as part of your very self-identity, and take some legitimate pride in your willingness to report on the messier things and to cast light on some of the darker corners of churchland. Fine. But you are still engaged in scribal work as members of the Body of Christ, and that cannot fall from view. Your vocation as scribes cannot be divorced from the claim placed on the whole church, that we actually *be* the Body of Christ.

In other words, what Peterson says to pastors he is also saying, at least indirectly, to you. To “give the people what they want”, or to meet the needs of people as they think they understand them, for the sake of circulation and success is a betrayal. Strategies for increasing circulation or the careful counting of website hits without having real, imaginative and transformative clarity as to why we’re doing any of this in the first place is worse than a dead end; it is idolatrous.

And for just about everyone here it is actually an odd thing to even ask questions about increasing circulation or reaching more consumers. For denominational publications and for those produced by parachurch organizations, your real readership is nothing more and nothing less than your church or organization membership. The *United Church Observer* might sell some subscriptions outside of its basic membership, but your core readership is found on the membership lists of your congregations. And who but friends and supporters of the Gideons is going to read the *Canadian Gideon*?

It is slightly different for a publication such as *ChristianWeek*, which is not tied directly to a church or parachurch structure. Now, I’m going to say some things about the Manitoba edition of *ChristianWeek* that are liable to sound harsh, but I only do that because I have considerable respect and affection for Doug Koop, and have begun to get to know, and to have similar respect for, Jerrad Peters... who happens to be a regular attendee at our church; or at least he has been, maybe until he hears me say what follows...

Christian Week Manitoba offers the following as its purpose statement: “*ChristianWeek Manitoba* exists to inform, encourage and inspire Christian community.” But what does

⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

that mean, really? Gone is the day of the *Christian Week* sister publication, the *Christian Current*, in which the popular music column was written by the program director from the local Christian pop station, and I've noticed that *Christian Week* at least skates outside of the world of "Contemporary Christian Music" when it does offer up CD reviews, but I don't see enough of the critically meaningful engagement in the world of which Borgmann writes. The default settings of *ChristianWeek* seem to be set by North American evangelical churchland culture, and it is from and within that subculture that the bulk of its readers are drawn. How could *ChristianWeek* take on a greater role in the transformation of imaginations – in the transformation of culture - in the way in which Jeremiah or Isaiah invite? How can our any of our publications manage to hear those prophets as speaking across the divide from their landscape into ours?

So, there are deep problems with questions that ask only about building and maintaining circulation; circulation and income and advertizing sales. That is another corner into which many of us have been backed. Thanks to shrinking budgets, the *Anglican Journal* has been forced to reduce itself in size to 12 pages, and in the May 2009 edition, five and a half of those pages were advertizing. This, in turn, has led to a dramatic reduction in actual content. In the 1990's, book, music and film reviews were each monthly fixtures; now there is generally only one such review in each issue. Further, the word count of those reviews has been tightly limited; I know this, because I have published several music reviews, which must be kept tightly clipped to 700 words; *this* preacher's nightmare. Again, I'm only singling out the *Journal* because I've contributed to it, and have enjoyed my correspondence with interim editor Keith Knight. I'm toughest on those I know and like...

While in Collegeville, I spoke with Donald Ottenhoff¹⁰, who worked for the *Christian Century* for a dozen years, more than half of that time in the role of senior editor. When Ottenhoff arrived at the *Century* in 1992, the circulation was in and around 24,000. Research had revealed that the average reader of the magazine was in their 50's or 60's, which implied that something had to be done to attract younger readers. He spoke of the oftentimes overwhelming pressure to conform to the conventional received wisdom regarding what people want in a publication, namely to give the publication the look and feel of the magazines that sit at the supermarket checkout stand. Brighten the covers, and give front cover prominence to articles that include numbered lists – 10 ways to do such and such, 5 steps to whatever – have lots of quick single paragraph pieces that will hook the potential reader, limit the word count of articles and reviews, retarget vocabulary to a lower grade equivalent, and so forth. Some of this Ottenhoff resisted, and on one count at least he moved the magazine upstream against the current of conventional wisdom by significantly increasing the length of book reviews. Yet there is no denying that the *Christian Century* has shifted many of its gears in response to the industry's common wisdom.

Of course it is tempting to try to solve the challenge of numbers and circulation by chasing the scent of the other great red herring, namely relevance. Use the latest gear to

¹⁰ The information in this paragraph was gathered in a personal interview with Donald Ottenhoff, May 1, 2009.

try to catch the wave and surf safely across the top, always watching for the next wave to come in. But you do realize that the whole of the media is currently being hit by something of a rogue wave that few, if any, really saw coming? And if they did see it, most apparently did not believe it could hit with near the force it has. You're aware, I'm sure, of the financial crises that such venerable papers as the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* are facing? That the *Christian Science Monitor* has ceased publishing a print edition, and is staking its entire future on an online version? Beyond print publications, that the CBC is undergoing drastic cutbacks, which have led to staff layoffs and the cancelation of several time-honoured radio programs? And that doesn't even begin to touch the complete upheaval that the whole recorded music industry is facing, thanks largely to the impact of the internet.

Some musicians will tell you that there is in this an incredible opportunity. Once upon a time, to make decent recording meant going into a studio outfitted with hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of gear. Now, with the right software and a few good microphones, independent artists can record at home in the basement and have original songs posted on MySpace or alonetone.com that same day. It is the same with writers. We don't need to spend weeks or months wondering if one of you will publish the piece we submitted; without too much trouble anyone can set up a pretty sophisticated blog or website, and publish away... you don't have to worry about such trivial things as editors or word counts... or quality or accuracy. Or being paid.

Some call this a democratization, while others celebrate and embrace it as a sort of much needed media anarchy – though I wonder if it isn't a bit like Bernard Shaw's definition of Hell: Hell is the place where you get to do what you want to do. Or as Stanley Hauerwas would put it, the place where everyone is his or her own tyrant.¹¹

According to Christopher Holland, in that open, sometimes anarchic place called the web, there is a distinction to be made between "religion online" – a thing most of us are doing, namely using the online context for the purpose of publicity, education, outreach and so forth – and "online religion", which is something else again. In "online religion" the internet becomes the place where a seeker can not only explore but actually practice a religious or spiritual way.¹² Try doing a Google search on "how to become a Wiccan," for instance. Or "Buddhist practice online." "Online church." "Becoming an angel." It is all there, and more. And a study by Hoover and Park suggests that seekers are the ones most likely to visit "online religion" sites, while people already connected to a faith tradition are the ones heading for "religion online" sites; our sites.¹³ That is just something of which to be aware.

I co-wrote a piece for the *Anglican Journal* with the blogger Brother Maynard – a piece which ended up falling victim to the downsizing of that paper and probably to the joint

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), p.

¹² Holland's work is used as the basis for Stewart M. Hoover and Jin Kyu Park, "Religion and Meaning in the Digital Age: Field Research on Internet/Web Religion," in Peter Horsfield, Mary E. Hess and Adan M. Medrano, eds. *Belief in Media* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 121-136.

¹³ Holland and Park, p. 122.

authors' insistence on being a bit too theologically clever – in which we reflected on matters of the emergent church and on relevance, and Brother Maynard offered up what I think is a true gem:

"Relevant" is a word which, for me, becomes increasingly *irrelevant*. It's so overused it loses meaning – I want to look at people chasing relevance and say, in the words of Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*, "You keep using that word... I do not think it means what you think it means." If the social and cultural context is in flux, then chasing cultural relevance will be an elusive goal.¹⁴

For instance, you've established a web presence by setting up a great online edition, but pretty soon you're going to have to add audio and video to keep up to speed. Somewhere along the line, someone suggests that you need a My Space page as well, and then Facebook, and now Twitter... you've linked a bunch of bloggers, but you want to keep an eye on what they're doing to be sure it is in concert with your ethos... and who knows what tomorrow will bring? Who can keep up?

Chasing relevance, chasing the thing that is going to be the key to our next chapter – video pieces on our websites, some fancy new interactive feature, or whatever it is that surfaces after Twitter – is a blind alley. All of that time and energy and focus and hope, yet is it actually doing anything like the thing that we're to be about as the Body of Christ? As members of the Body who are entrusted with the scribal and journalistic task? A bit more from Brother Maynard:

Once you reshape for "today," you're irrelevant because everyone else has moved on, so either you're tuned in as it happens or you're three steps behind. By the time you import someone's how-to program to rectify the situation, it's too late. We need a *timeless* approach.¹⁵

Timeless, yes, but what is timeless? Am I suggesting that we should all become Luddites, reject anything new or innovative, and stick with the print publications until they're basically advertising flyers with a few articles, read only by those who have rejected newer technologies? No. That's not being timeless, but rather tied to a very particular time in the story of scribal work.

No, the way is not back to some idealized simpler time, nor is it to be found in freezing things in the present. The way is indeed forward, but the goal can be neither raw growth nor driven by some reading of what is socially relevant.

At least some of you will remember Reginald Bibby's 1987 book *Fragmented Gods*, in which he predicted a dire future for any church which counted on denominational loyalty as part of its make-up. The future was increasingly going to be one where churchgoers would be consumers, shopping freely across denominational lines till they found an

¹⁴ Brother Maynard, aka Brent Toderash, "Exploring Things Emergent with Brother Maynard," unpublished article written with Jamie Howison.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

appealing brand.¹⁶ What is the relevant response to that observation? Tailor-make and market your brand, and do it with all the best techniques that marketing can offer. In 2002, Bibby published *Restless Gods*, in which he confessed that much to his own surprise this trend seemed to be reversing; that among the young, there were emerging signs of loyalty to particular traditions and congregations, and that when lines were crossed it was often not for the reasons he'd originally predicted.¹⁷

Similarly, in a piece published in the *Christian Century* in 2000, Lauren Winner described what she had come to observe among the 20-something GenXers of that period. They are interested, wrote Winner, in “substance, not the packaging,” and then continued, “People come to church looking for spiritual food - they shouldn't leave feeling like they have to go to an ashram to find it.”¹⁸

Ironically, we could now turn substantial offerings of spiritual food - expressions of depth and explorations of the great tradition - into the next thing that we try out in the pursuit of relevance. Want to grow your church? Icons and incense. Want to sell more copies of your publication? Try including excerpts from the *Rule of St Benedict* and illustrations from the *Book of Kells*. Which is kind of what has been happening as a movement called the emerging church began to be domesticated into the brand name Emergent... but that is a whole other keynote address.

No, relevance dates, and dates badly and quickly. Timelessness, at least in the context of the church, takes work and intentionality, particularly in a cultural milieu that is built around consumption and the myth of the easy life. That myth just won't deliver, of course, because in a consumption-driven economy there will always be *more* to consume, for the sake of which you will be expected to become financially indebted. Instead, unveil the myth, and do it with what Borgmann calls “counterpractice:” “(S)ince technology as a way of life is so pervasive, so well entrenched, and so concealed in its quotidianity, Christians must meet the rule of technology with a deliberate and regular counterpractice.”¹⁹

Your unique counterpractice is to be scribes.²⁰ Not the sort of tired and compromised scribes who are lumped in with the Pharisees in Matthew 23, in that memorable phrase ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!’ No, you are to be the sort of scribes Jesus refers to in that same gospel, when after teaching a series of parables of the Kingdom he has the following exchange with the disciples,

51 ‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’⁵² And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like

¹⁶ Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods* (Toronto: Irwin, 1987).

¹⁷ Reginald Bibby, *Restless Gods* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 2002).

¹⁸ Lauren Winner, “GenX Revisited” in *The Christian Century*, November 8, 2000, p. 1148.

¹⁹ Borgmann, p. 94.

²⁰ The material that follows has been deeply influenced by the work of Walter Brueggemann, including his essay “The Preacher as Scribe” in *Inscribing the Text*

the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ (Mt 13:51-52)

You are to bring out of your treasure what is new and what is old, and somewhere in doing that you might just be offering up the real, timeless thing that we all crave. And what is that and how do we actually do it? Well, those are the right questions to be asking.

The scribes come to the fore in ancient Israel at a time when all of the familiar guideposts have been uprooted. For over five hundred years, Israel had been able to count on its story being carried forward by both palace and temple; by church and state, so to speak. When that story began to distort – either through some problematic king or a hollowness of practice amongst the temple priests – they could count on the prophets to come and call things as they saw them; to be the voices that could confront both royal household and morally compromised religious practice.

The whole thing sprung apart at the point when Babylon needed to secure a new trade route, which just happened to run through the middle of Israel. Predictably, the Israelites resisted, and so they were effectively dismembered as a nation. How in heaven’s name do you tell your story when you’re not even sure if there is a story to be told after the whole familiar world in which you’d exercised your faith has been dismantled? When your deepest fear is that either the God you’ve been backing is not as strong as Babylon, or that crazy Jeremiah was right... God is judging us by forsaking us. Enter the scribes. They remembered. They re-membered the entire story of Israel, right up to and including the disaster that was the Babylonian exile. They not only preserved the story, they told new ones. They listened to songs of lament being sung at the edges of the Babylonian rivers, and they wrote them down. And they helped the people begin to imagine how to be the people *of God* in this strange place. How to be Israel in an utterly new, yet deeply rooted manner.

And that’s your job. Earlier in this address, when I first cited Thomas Beaudoin and Albert Borgmann I said something to the effect that given that these two have the whole of Western culture in their sights, their work can’t possibly have anything to do with that of the Canadian Church Press. If you assumed that at some point I was going to get around to saying that their concern for Western society and Western culture is in fact germane to your work and calling... you were right. People who are scribes for the Kingdom of God can’t just hive off and write about internal events and church housekeeping, and we can’t just focus on the parallel culture of churchland or how distant we feel from an increasingly fragmented society or how wonderful it was to have that mission trip into the heart of that fragmented society, or, or, or.... Scribes for the Kingdom will engage the world in all of its brokenness and beauty; will engage the culture’s insights and longings; will find the places where truth is sought and told, even if that is in words not our own. And a church that embraces the work of the scribe will also unleash some of us to enact our practice in the public square, in the secular media, as journalists and producers of media who are Christian, and whose way of being in the world is Christian. As Malcolm Muggeridge said in his 1976 “London Lectures in

Contemporary Christianity”, published as the book *Christ and the Media*, “What a Christian can do in whatever part of the media he may be working, wherever his lot may be cast, is to continue to be a Christian.”²¹ In that way and in those places, she or he will be a part of the shaping and forming of culture.

Yes, the scribal task is your job. And while you can’t do it with the elusive goal of relevance as your driving force – while timelessness is such a critical piece of the whole – you do need to do things in a *timely* manner. When in 2004 Donald Ottenhoff²² left the *Christian Century*, its circulation had increased by about 10,000 or some 40%. But guess what? The average reader was still in his or her 50’s or 60’s. As it turns out, that had been the heart of the magazine’s readership for some time, and will probably continue to be so: people with time, disposable income, and maybe enough experience of life in the church and the wider society that they are looking to read some varied and insightful interpretive voices and wise guides. Some parallel to this is no doubt true of readers of magazines such as *Harper’s* – the cost of which is offset by a significant endowment fund – and *The New Yorker* – which only survives because it is subsidized through the sales of a few of those supermarket magazines which are owned by the same publisher.

Yet when I asked Ottenhoff if he thought the *Christian Century* – which is the oldest church publication on the continent – has a future as a print publication, he said that at best it might last 20 to 25 years, and that even then it would be as part of what is called the “boutique market” of very specialized, limited circulation magazines. He believes that the coming wave is, without any shadow of a doubt, electronic and highly visual. A web presence is not only important; it will almost inevitably be the future for all kinds of publishing, including but not limited to newspapers and magazines. To look ahead thoughtfully and critically in this manner is to be sufficiently timely in taking a long view of the horizon to which we’re moving, which is something quite different from madly chasing tomorrow’s trend. For Ottenhoff, it is also driven by a very right question: “How does truth get told?” If people aren’t reading, or aren’t reading print publications, or aren’t accustomed to reading particularly deeply, how does truth get told? And along with that set of questions comes another one: “is it part of the truth-telling scribal task to help people to learn how to read and reflect more deeply?”

There is one more bit of an anecdote to offer, and then I’ll bring this to a close and we can all have a bit of a conversation. The writer and theologian Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove writes of being at a forum at a Benedictine monastery, which had this great moment of clarity for him regarding these challenges.

The abbot shared concerns about how technology can take over our lives. A guest in the audience protested, ‘But we can’t just stay in the Dark Ages.’ ‘Of course

²¹ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media* (), p. 83.

²² The information in the following two paragraphs was gathered in a personal interview with Donald Ottenhoff, May 1, 2009.

not,' the abbot said, reaching under his monk's robe to pull a cell phone out of his pocket. 'But can we show the world how to use this and still listen to God?'²³

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²³ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, "Learning from Enemies," *Bearings*, Vol 1 Number 1, Winter/Spring 2009, pp. 13-14.