

ISSUES FACING WITNESS AND DISCIPLESHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract: *With the launch of the internet the church is additionally confronted with a vast new frontier of cross-cultural missions as billions today seamlessly move between the environs of physical and digital (cyber) 'space'. The challenge for the church is how to effectively reach and disciple the unreached 'digital natives'; the emerging generation of, 30 years and younger, who constitute over 50% of the global population today.*

Keywords: *Witness, Discipleship, Digital Age, Connected-generation*

1. Introduction

What is the task of the Church? What are the priorities of Christian ministry? These questions confronted me decades ago, at the outset of my journey as a vocational youth worker in my local church. Back then, as today, local church ministries defaulted to programmes and activities as their *raison d'être* with the accompanying logic that the greater and more-intense our commitment to programmes, the more-likely would be our chances at fulfilling the church's mandate. It didn't take long to realize that it was not sustainable. Programmes did draw larger numbers but did little to foster commitment, engagement, and what was most desirable: the transformation of character and lifestyle.

It was at such a time that I re-encountered Colossians 1:28-29: "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me". It was a transformative moment for me. I could see how all

of Paul's efforts were directed to a singular goal: to present every individual in his care as "fully mature in Christ". Achieving this goal would consume all his energy in *evangelistic proclamation* and *evangelical teaching*. Realising this I was able to reset the focus of the youth ministry. The emphasis shifted from organising effective events to nurturing effective disciples. I had to learn to develop ministry on the paradigm of *witness and discipleship*.

A close examination of the biblical narratives about apostolic ministry, and of the letters they wrote, reveal to us two great priorities that they pursued. On the one hand they were passionate about saving the lost, whether Jew or Gentile (see Romans 15:18-20; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). On the other hand they were dedicated to the spiritual formation of the new Christians in keeping with a biblical worldview and radical discipleship. This in turn would protect them from falling prey to persuasive heresies (see Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:11-16) and promote their healthy growth towards mature and fruitful Christian lives (Philippians 1:9-11). In other words the apostles were careful to practise an integrated ministry of *witness* and *discipleship*.

This is the reason that as the Christian faith spread rapidly in the Roman world, Africa and Asia, it was still able to retain its essential moral character and theological integrity. The apostles had maintained both commitments in their obedience to the Great Commission: the *declaration* of the faith together with the *defense* of the faith.

2. Witness and Discipleship as the integrated task of Christian ministry

Witness and *discipleship* are two key terms in the theology of the New Testament.

2.1. Witness

"Witness" (*martyreō*, *martys*, *martyria*) occurs nearly one hundred times, with the majority of references in John and Luke. Originally the lexical content had to do with someone recalling an experience that could not be ignored, which

naturally led to its primary use within the legal sphere; that is to say that ‘witnesses’ are those who give evidence in a trial. Even before the NT era, however, the meaning of the word-group expanded beyond the courtroom to include the expression of moral or philosophical convictions. It is this combination of meanings – testifying to something seen and heard as well as expressing deep, personal convictions – which we find in use in the Gospels and Acts.¹

The noun *martyrs* is only used once, and strategically, in Luke 24:48 (“You are witnesses of these things”), and points to the fact that the apostles were exclusive eyewitnesses to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This solemn calling to witness is echoed again in Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses”. The qualification of a suitable apostle is later clarified as one who had had first-hand experiences of Jesus from the commencement of his public ministry until his ascension: “one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22).

David Bosch points to the fact that particularly in Luke’s paradigm for mission the witness terminology becomes crucial, and “witness” is used as Luke’s very term for “mission”. So, although Paul and Stephen did not experience the events in the public ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, they too were “witnesses” because of their personal experiences of his life-transforming power and their deep conviction about his status as Lord. Like in the case of Paul and Stephen the Church today derives its identity as “witnesses” and consequently gives testimony to the Gospel, on the basis of the enduring influence of the Resurrected Christ. Bosch comments: “In Acts the content of the witness (the *martyria*) refers, on the whole, to the church’s proclamation of the gospel. Primarily “gospel” alludes to the resurrection and *its significance*”.² It is in this latter sense of the “significance” of the resurrection of Christ that the

1. See, A A Trites, “Witness, Testimony” in Colin Brown ed., *New International Dictionary of the New Testament* Vol 3:1038-1051.

2. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2003), 116.

church down the ages has continued to be “witness” to.

Evangelistic witness to the Gospel of Jesus as Saviour and Lord, however, is most effectively accomplished through the combination of the Church’s presence, proclamation, and praxis. Evangelicalism has struggled over the last many decades to decide how to relate proclamation evangelism with social action done in the name of Christ and Christian presence in the world. The Lausanne Covenant in 1974 captures this tension.³ With regards to social action it states, “We affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and humankind, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ”.⁴ It also comments on Christian presence: “Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand”.⁵ But thereafter the Covenant concludes its position by stating, “In the Church’s mission of sacrificial service, *evangelism is primary*”.⁶

By the third Lausanne Congress in Cape Town (2010) we see a maturing of the evangelical understanding of witness as holistic. In the concluding words of the *Cape Town Commitment*, we read:

Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.⁷

3. Julia E M Cameron ed., *The Lausanne Legacy – Landmarks in Global Mission* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2016), 13-53.

4. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 28.

5. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 24.

6. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 31.

7. Cameron, *Lausanne Legacy*, 125.

By the fourth Lausanne Congress in Incheon (2024) the holism of integral mission expressed in Cape Town was nuanced further to include “presence” alongside “proclamation” and “demonstration” (practice):

In the power of his Word and Spirit, God sends us out into the world as a holy people to bear witness to the gospel before a watching world. We do this through our *Christ-filled presence*, our *Christ-centred proclamation*, and our *Christlike practice*. (Matthew 28:18-20)⁸

Evert Van de Poll recognises this as “A kind of *new mission model*: presence, proclamation and practice” (italics added).⁹

2.2. Discipleship

“Disciple” (*mathētēs*, “learner, pupil”) is the most frequent designation for those who had committed themselves to be associated with Jesus in his public ministry. In over 300 uses in the NT it is exclusive to the Gospels and Acts. In its original Greek sense a *mathētēs* was someone who bound himself to another to gain his practical and theoretical knowledge, as an “apprentice in a trade, a student of medicine, or a member of a philosophical school”. Discipleship was only possible in the company of a “teacher” (*didaskalos*).¹⁰

Rabbinic Judaism developed this concept further where the learner-teacher relationship was made more intense: “The *talmîd* now, as originally the Gk. *mathētēs*, belongs to his teacher, to whom he subordinates himself in almost servile fashion”.¹¹ As we know Jesus adopted and transformed these fundamental notions of discipleship. Whereas Greek and Rabbinic disciples *volunteered* to come

8. “The Church: The People of God We Love and Build Up” in *The Seoul Statement*, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>. Internet accessed 12 April 2025.

9. Evert Van de Poll, “Evaluating the Lausanne Congress’s Seoul Statement”, *Evangelical Review of Theology* (2025) 49:1, 9-10.

10. On this see, D Müller, *maqḥṭh* in Colin Brown ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Vol 1:483-490.

11. *Ibid*, 485.

under a teacher, Christian discipleship was contingent on the 'call' by the Master. And whereas traditionally disciples attached themselves to a teacher for a limited period of time, until they themselves could separate to become independent teachers themselves, the call to Christian discipleship was absolute and demanded a lifelong commitment of loyalty and obedience to Jesus Christ.

It is this unique character of Christian discipleship that comes through in all the Gospels, but of them Matthew is the most focused on the theme. In comparison to Mark's use of "disciple" forty-six times, and Luke's thirty-seven, Matthew mentions "disciple" seventy-three times. Most significantly he employs the more rare verb, *mathēteuō*, "make disciples" on three of the four occasions in the NT (see, Matthew 13:52; 27:57; 28:19 and Acts 14:21). In the climax to his Gospel he presents Jesus's final commission to the eleven disciples: "Go and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:19). In this instruction it is clear that the participles "baptizing" in the name of the triune God, and "teaching" to obey are subordinate to "make disciples", the main verb used with imperatival force.¹²

The only occurrence of the verb *mathēteuō* ("make disciples") in Paul's ministry (Acts 14:21) is most significant because it again expresses Paul's commitment to the integration of witness and discipleship in his praxis of ministry: "After they had *proclaimed the good news* to that city and had *made many disciples*, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch" (NRSV).¹³

3. Fruitfulness in Witness and Failure in Discipleship: The Malady of Modern Missions

The contemporary condition of global Christianity

12. See, Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 73-74.

13. Also NASB, NAB, Amplified, and NLT; but "taught many" (KJV), "won a large number of disciples" (NIV).

suggests a glaring imbalance. In the last three centuries the church has done remarkably well in the proclamation of the faith, but can the same be said of her building-up of the faithful? Millions have received the Gospel message and joined the church, but to what extent have they been grounded in Christian convictions and enabled to live Christ-like lives?

The period of church history from 1792 – 1910 has been called the “Great Century” by the eminent church historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette. Its *terminus a quo* is the year that William Carey published a book titled, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*, and the *terminus ad quem*, the year of the first global missionary conference in Edinburgh.¹⁴ Timothy Tennent comments: “Never before had so many Christians moved to so many vast and remote parts of the globe and communicated the gospel across so many cultural boundaries”.¹⁵

What Carey was proposing, in summary, was the formation of mission societies that would focus on the “means” necessary to efficiently and effectively communicate the gospel message to hundreds of people-groups in every part of the globe. The result was the formation of societies such as the Baptist Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.¹⁶ The consequence of this dynamic period of European and American missionary efforts is captured in the recently released *State of the Great Commission Report*:¹⁷

14. See Timothy C Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel, 2010), 255-283.

15. Tennent, *World Missions*, 256-257.

16. *Ibid.*, 262-263.

17. Victor Nakah and Ivor Poobalan, “The Great Commission: A Theological Basis” in Matthew Niermann ed., *State of the Great Commission – A Report on the Current + Future State*, 3-4 (available at: https://lausanne.org/report?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwnui_BhDIARIsAEo9Guv5VZdYQTTXQotjI2upKA0Bd7qK3PqpLTB0sIJBYD4MgtL0bPEaLvAaAk6aEALw_wcB)

With thousands of missionaries fanning out across the globe, under the auspices of numerous missions-societies, the evangelization of the two-thirds world has reached unprecedented levels of accomplishment. Christian communities had been planted in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the nineteenth century, were watered by mass evangelistic initiatives of Western evangelical organizations in the twentieth. Simultaneously unprecedented numbers of indigenous missions-movements throughout the global south intensified efforts at witnessing to Christ in ways that were contextually effective.

The result has been exponential church growth leading to the surprising realization by the turn of the twenty-first century that the face of Christianity was no longer stereotypically white. The image of Christianity in the world was more likely to be black African, Latin American or East Asian! Philip Jenkins projected in 2002 that of 2.6 billion Christians estimated for 2025, “633 million would live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia. Europe, with 555million, would have slipped to third place”.¹⁸

It is a matter of grave curiosity that as late as the 1990s this staggering shift in the centre of gravity of Christian presence was not granted any recognition within academia. Tennent illustrates this inexplicable omission:

As late as the year 1990 when *Christian History* magazine listed the one hundred most significant

18. On these statistical projections see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2-3; he adds: “[T]he stereotype holds that Christians are un-Black, un-poor, and un-young. If that is true, then the growing secularization of the West can only mean that Christianity is in its dying days. Globally, the faith of the future must be Islam. Over the past century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward, to Africa, Asia and Latin America.”

events in the history of Christianity, there was not a single reference to any event taking place in the Majority World or initiated by Majority World Christians. We sometimes forget from today's vantage-point how slow the church has been in recognizing the dramatic

global developments in the Christian church throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America.¹⁹

Tennent goes further to point to the exponential, five-thousand percent, growth of independent indigenous Christian movements in the global south: "from only eight million at the turn of the twentieth century to 423 million by the close of the twenty-first century".²⁰

Following on from this, Victor Nakah and Ivor Poobalan comment:

Never since the early centuries, has Christianity grown so rapidly in previously un-evangelised societies in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The most-recent stories of church growth in Asia for example – in places such as China, Iran, and Nepal – are nothing short of miraculous, because the Gospel has thrived in predominantly communist, Islamic, and Hindu contexts where sustained antipathy and hostility have been most vocal and active.

Yet, unlike the apostolic and post-apostolic period, the modern church's commitment to *witness* has not been accompanied by a concomitant commitment to disciple-making. As a result we are forced to concede today that Christian spirituality is at risk of becoming 'a mile long and an inch deep'. In the evangelical Church's enthusiasm to contend with liberal theology and assert the uniqueness

19. Timothy C Tennent, "Lausanne and Global Evangelicalism: Theological Distinctives and Missiological Impact" in Margunn Serigstad Dahle, Lars Dahle, Knud Jorgensen eds., *The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives* (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 57.

20. Tennent, "Lausanne and Global Evangelicalism", 58.

of Christ and the necessity for evangelistic proclamation, did she fail to prepare adequately for the harvest of new believers that would emerge following the faithful witness of vibrant church communities?²¹

Especially following the most significant, historic gathering of 2700 global evangelical leaders at Lausanne in 1974, where they covenanted to a fresh impetus in world evangelization, Christian mission towards unreached people groups was energised and accelerated. But little or no emphasis was placed on the vital importance of discipleship, spirituality and formation. This is the subject of Sarah Nicholl's *Integrated Mission*, in which she laments the lack of integration of spirituality and missional action in the broader evangelical world.²² Her work focuses on the Lausanne Movement and its foundational documents (*The Lausanne Covenant*, *The Manila Manifesto*, *The Cape Town Commitment*) as a means of ascertaining how evangelicals have fared, globally:

The [Cape Town] Commitment gives more credence to the world and the laity ministering within it. It also guides missionaries to the type of life they ought to live. For me, this expansion of practice within the world increases the burden of mission on the laity without providing a way of formation or direction based on a life under God the Creator, in Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, that is, with the Triune God. I consider that Lausanne's proposals of more education for Church leaders, though helpful, is inadequate. In my view, *the lack of a formative spirituality for leaders and laity alike is a significant lacuna that needs challenging* (italics added).²³

It is telling that with the very last book John Stott wrote, before he "lay down his pen for the last time", he

21. Victor Nakah and Ivor Poobalan, "The Great Commission", 4.

22. Sarah Nicholl, *Integrated Mission* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Academic, 2024).

23. Nicholl, *Integrated Mission*, 47.

determined that it should be about ‘radical discipleship’. He wanted to address the response of a believer that goes beyond a mere claim to a Christian identity: “My concern in this book is that we who claim to be disciples of the Lord Jesus will not provoke him to say again, ‘Why do you call me “Lord, Lord”, and do not do what I say?’ For genuine discipleship is wholehearted discipleship”.²⁴

In a global survey conducted over a 10-month period (September 2020 – July 2021) and involving dozens of ‘listening calls’, a team of mission leaders pursued responses to five key questions. The first of these was, “What are the most significant gaps or remaining opportunities for the fulfilment of the Great Commission?” The notes from all the listening calls, amounting to over 104,000 words were scientifically coded and analysed and yielded eleven ‘significant gaps’ globally. In ascending order of importance, they are: marketplace and workplace ministries, contextualization, cross-cultural missions, creation care, Muslim evangelism, unreached people groups, unresponsiveness of churches to the external world, diversity in leadership, love and unity, and reaching younger generations. The concern that came out on top globally was the need for *discipleship*.²⁵

The survey confirmed, what has been a matter of unease for years, that the most critical ‘gap’ in global Christianity is the lack of clarity and commitment within evangelicalism to nurture authentic Christian discipleship. This is the cry from the ground, and after years of neglect the rich harvest of new believers around the world faces the two gravest threats to their progress in sanctification and maturity: the impulse towards *erroneous beliefs* and the impulse towards *unchristian behaviour*.

24. John Stott, *Radical Disciple: Some Neglected Aspects of Our Calling* (UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 9.

25. “Analysis of Lausanne 4 Listening Calls”, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/The-Evangelical-Church-Interacting-between-the-Global-and-the-Local-Global-Listening-Team-Report-21.11.03.pdf Internet accessed 10 April 2025

4. The Vulnerability of First-Generation Christians to Misbelief and Misbehaviour

The first is the risk of *misbelief*; the vulnerability to confuse the essential message of the Gospel of Christ. This was the ongoing burden evident in all the writings of the NT. In almost all of the Pauline epistles we find him arguing against some heretical tendency or the other, urging his people to “not be deceived by fine-sounding arguments” (Colossians 2:4; cf. 2:8; Philippians 3:2; Galatians 4:17; 2 Corinthians 11:1-4). The recognition of heterodox teachings and the grave danger these posed to the early Christians come into sharper relief in the later documents of the NT such as the Pastoral Letters and the letters of John and Jude.²⁶ The purpose statement of the brief epistle of Jude states:

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, *I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people*. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (vv.3-4)

In a similar vein, millions of Christians in the majority world are currently bombarded by heterodox teachings that distort and pervert the truth of Christ’s Gospel. But unlike the Early Church there is little recognition of their insidious power to cause the Church to implode and little alarm raised by church leaders tasked with the shepherding of the faithful.

On the heels of the greatest global expansion of the Christian faith since the apostolic period,²⁷ we are seeing the

26. For a discussion on the development of ‘sound doctrine’ in the New Testament Church see, Ivor Poobalan, “The Emergence of the Deposit of Faith” in Nathanael Somanathan ed., *The Faith Entrusted* (Kohuwela, Sri Lanka: Colombo Theological Seminary, 2020), 51-77.

27. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 256: “During that period

advent of false teachers and false teachings filling the space that ought to have been occupied by dedicated pastors and teachers instructing the young believers on “what is appropriate to sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). This concern is captured in the preamble to *The Seoul Statement* released by the Lausanne Movement in September 2024:

We regret that during the last 50 years of evangelistic harvest, the global church has not adequately provided the teaching necessary to help new believers develop a truly biblical worldview. The church has often failed to nurture new believers to obey Christ’s call to radical discipleship at home, at school, in the church, in our neighbourhoods, and in the marketplace. It has also struggled to equip its leaders to respond to trending social values and to distortions of the gospel, which have threatened to erode the sincere faith of Christians and to destroy the unity and fellowship of the church of the Lord Jesus. Consequently, we are alarmed by the rise of false teachings and pseudo-Christian lifestyles, leading numerous believers away from the essential values of the gospel.²⁸

In fact even at this late hour the lack of interest and awareness of the trends affecting these young churches of the global south is incomprehensible. A Kenyan scholar, John Mbiti commented in the 1970s: “It is utterly scandalous for so many Christian scholars in the old Christendom to know so much about heretical movements in the second and third centuries, when so few of them know anything about Christian movements in areas of the younger churches”.²⁹

The second grave danger of the lack of committed

[the Great Century], which is roughly coterminous with the nineteenth century, more new Christians emerged from a wider number of new people groups than at any previous time in the history of the church.”

28. See, “Preamble”, *The Seoul Statement*, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>. Internet accessed 11 April 2025.

29. Cited in Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 4.

disciple-making is the risk of *misbehaviour*. When Christians are not grounded in the knowledge of God's Word and have not become disciplined in the application of the principles of Scripture to everyday living, ethical and moral distortions emerge that eventually become normalised. These then gradually and decisively influence the wider body of believers because of the natural openness that exist in Christian relationships, until finally whole communities become incapable of discerning its wrong, even scandalous, value-systems such as sexual immorality, conflictual nature, racism and materialism. It is this danger that prompted Paul to warn the Corinthians: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6).

In fact it is not rare to hear that an evangelical leader, often with great national or international standing, has been accused of scandalous behaviour and grave sin in the areas of financial misappropriation, sexual misconduct or the abuse of power. Worse, it is not rare to hear of churches and denominations that have made concentrated efforts to cover-up such wrongdoing. This concern is captured in *The Seoul Statement* (2024):

... despite our claim to be followers of our crucified Lord, we have often failed to live in keeping with the holy pattern of life he gave to us and to teach others to do the same. The result has been a steady stream of reports of financial mismanagement, of sexual misconduct and abuse, of abuse of power among leaders, of efforts to cover-up these failures while ignoring the pain of those who have suffered because of them, and of spiritual anaemia and immaturity in evangelical churches around the world.³⁰

What has been sorely lacking with regard to discipleship is what, in 1792, Carey urged for with regard to evangelistic witness: "the obligation of Christians to use means". With

30. See, "Discipleship: Our Calling to Holiness and Mission" *The Seoul Statement*, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>. Internet accessed 11 April 2025.

pastors unable to cope with overwhelming numbers, and seminaries remaining fixated on traditional models of education, the field has been left wide open for passionate and creative individuals to lead scores of sincere believers to misbelieve and misbehave.

The question that confronts us is, what will happen to these hundreds of millions of new believers should the church not put in place the “means” by which they would all be faithfully instructed and empowered to live consistent Christian lives of theological and ethical integrity.

On this we will do well to look back to the practices of the Early Church, immediately following the New Testament era, when careful systems were put in place to nurture and establish the converts in the rudiments of Christian discipleship through “catechesis”, which required a great amount of effort on the part of Church elders:³¹

Catechesis was seen as a major task of Church leaders. Many of the well-known leaders of the ancient Church set aside much time and energy for instructing new believers in the faith, in spite of their many administrative tasks.³²

Catechesis was required for all new church members, and aimed at what was considered the “proper formation”, which “taught people how to live and what to believe, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures”. This Christian instruction had a rudimentary curriculum that included teaching on the meaning of the sacraments, the learning of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ and the Creeds by heart, and participation in the weekly liturgy of the Church:

The liturgy was the early Church’s most effective manner of Christian formation for all its members. After the formal period of instruction, followed by Baptism, the believers were weekly taught the Christian life through the liturgy of the Church – the verbal and visual re-enactment of all the basic aspects of the Christian faith they had

31. John Kafwanka and Mark Oxbrow ed. *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making* (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2016), 29-30.

32. Kafwanka and Oxbrow, *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making*, 29.

learned about. Through its liturgy and all aspects of it, they were taught how to be true followers of Jesus Christ.³³

Following the twentieth century shift in the centre of gravity of global Christianity from the global north to the global south – from being primarily an extension of the established traditions of western Christendom to becoming increasingly the harvest of first-generation believers through indigenous Christian witness – there is an urgent need for relevant, thought-through methods (in Calvin’s terms, “the use of means”) that aim to ground believers in “how to be true followers of Jesus Christ”. The woeful lack of emphasis on effective ‘catechesis’ in modern evangelicalism, therefore, threatens to significantly undermine the integrity of our Christian witness in the twenty-first century.

5. The Digital World: The New Frontier in Cross-Cultural Missions

5.1. Constructing Cyberspace: Internet, Mobile Technology and Social Media

*“New media” is a term used to describe a whole range of digital technologies and forms of media, including computers, the internet, cell phones and smart phones, social networking software, and digital recording devices.*³⁴

The launch of the *Internet* (or World Wide Web) in the 1990s added new levels of complexity to the challenges of witness and discipleship. People began accommodating themselves *en masse* to this new environment, while a whole new generation – the Millennials – was being born into it. Between 2000 and 2015 the number of people accessing the internet globally grew from 6.5 percent to 43 percent. By early 2025 that number soared to 67.5 percent, which amounts to 5.56 billion users.

33. See, Kafwanka and Oxbrow, *Intentional Discipleship*, 29-30.

34. Heidi A Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), 40.

Smartphones were first introduced in 1992, but became commonplace from around 2012. Today mobile technology has become almost an extension of the human body. Smartphone sales during the period 2007-2014 averaged 512 million a year. In 2024 the number of smartphones sold reached 1.22 billion. With regard to smart phone engagement, conservative estimates suggest that a person checks his or her device over 1000 times a week.

Social Media first became a thing when the number of monthly users on MySpace reached a million in 2004. Since then the number of people on social media has grown to reach 5.24 billion in 2025, with most using more than one platform regularly. Six platforms (FB, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and WeChat) have over 1 billion users each. FB has 3.07 billion, YouTube 2.53 billion, and Instagram 2 billion. On average a user spends 2 hours and 21 minutes on social media every day.

But aren't these nothing more than the impressive statistics about a successful new product? How is all this different from the numerous occasions when the world was confronted by innovative new technology?

The digital world is not like anything we have known before – it is the appearance of something entirely new in human experience:

We are living through *a unique period of human history, an intense period of flux, change and disruption that may never be repeated*. A seismic shift in living and thinking is taking place due to the rapid and pervasive introduction of new technologies to daily life, which has changed the way we communicate, work, shop, socialize, and do almost everything else. This moment in time is not unlike the Enlightenment (1650-1800), when there were also great shifts in awareness, knowledge, and technology, accompanied by great societal changes (italics added).³⁵

Campbell and Garner concur with this view, arguing that

35. Mary Aiken, *The Cyber Effect* (London: John Murray, 2016), 8.

digitality has transformed the way society is being imagined and constructed:

This creates a situation where people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members. Thus, the network in the network society is a distinctive social system undergirded by digital communication technologies that promote new forms of social connection and information sharing and encourage individual choice and freedom”.³⁶

As much as we are tempted to think of the reality of cyber – internet, mobile technology and social media – as a mere phase that humanity has entered, it is necessary for us to recognize that cyberspace is an *actual place*:

Cyberspace is a distinct place. You may be accessing it from a familiar environment, like the comfort of your own home, but as soon as you go online, you have traveled to a different location in terms of your awareness or consciousness, your emotions, your responses, and your behavior – which will vary depending on your age, your physical and mental development, and your distinct set of personality traits.³⁷

People have fantasised for centuries if the universe held the potential of other worlds for humans to occupy, and even today scientists search distant galaxies for that elusive planet that may offer the conditions conducive for human habitation. Strange as it may seem, that day has arrived in an entirely unexpected manner. For the first time in history people have the *psychological* option of carrying on their lives in two distinct worlds: the world of physical space and the world of cyberspace.

Many who reflect on this phenomenon, though, were born before the age of the internet. They engage in cyberspace using the terms of reference and the cues honed through their interactions in the physical world. These

36. Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 9.

37. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 9-10.

are the *digital migrants* struggling to acclimatise to this unfamiliar environment.

5.2. But have we not reached a tipping point?

Fifty-two percent of the world's population today are under thirty years of age, and every one of them may be rightly called a *digital native*. The internet, social media, and mobile technology constitute their primary frame of reference and construct the environment for their being. Adam Greenfield explains it well:

Networked digital information technology has become the dominant mode through which we experience the everyday. In some important sense this class of technology now mediates just about everything we do. It is simultaneously the conduit through which our choices are delivered to us, the mirror by which we see ourselves reflected, and the lens that lets others see us on a level previously unimagined.³⁸

This changed environment has a profound impact on human being and behaviour. As Mary Aiken argues:

As complex as human beings are, and as adaptable, psychologists know from a myriad of studies and research that when an individual moves to any new location – a new home, a new school, a new city, or a foreign country – his or her behaviour will change or adapt . . . according to theories of development, an awareness of self comes through a gradual process of adaptation to one's environment.³⁹

We have all experienced the tendency to behave very differently when we are online in comparison to our behaviour in person. One of these little-discussed factors is the *online disinhibition effect*, an uncharacteristic level of adventurism, which arises from an illusionary belief

38. Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, cited in Vo Hong Nam, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham, 2023), 26.

39. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 10.

that somehow our digital environments carry fewer risks. Consequently, people lose their inhibitions and behave differently, even like ‘drunks’ within this space: “Disinhibition is facilitated by the environmental conditions of cyberspace – by the perceived lack of authority, the anonymity, as well as the sense of distance or physical remove”.⁴⁰

Another important behavioural factor is *online escalation*, where “problem behaviours become bigger – or amplified – online”. Aiken argues: “Whenever technology comes in contact with an underlying predisposition, or tendency for a certain behaviour, it can result in behavioural amplification or escalation”.⁴¹

Nam Vo, however, alerts us to the positive accentuation of online behaviour through the work of Don Tapscott in his book, *Growing Up Digital*, in which he identifies eight characteristics of the ‘Net Generation’: “freedom of choice, customization, collaboration, scepticism, integrity, entertainment, speed, innovation”. Understanding these tendencies will foster greater openness and empathy when engaging with people shaped within cyberspace:

The youth seek freedom in everything they do, from freedom of choice to freedom of expression. They want to have fun in their work, education, family and social life. They are very collaborative through the practice of playing multi-user video games; texting each other instantly; and sharing files for school, work or just for fun. They also influence each other through online discussion. They seek innovative environments and are constantly looking for innovative ways to collaborate, entertain themselves, learn and work.⁴²

The ‘accent’ of digital natives (if we care enough to listen) will demonstrate how differently their values, priorities and

40. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 21.

41. Aiken, *Cyber Effect*, 22.

42. Don Tapscott, *Growing Up Digital*, cited in, Vo Huong Nam, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship*, 20-21.

behaviours are shaped, *in comparison to those who are digital migrants* of the cultural divide. These differences may give rise to prejudice and alienation and prevent Christians from the pre-internet generation from interacting meaningfully in the digital world.

6. Witness and Discipleship in a Digital World

Effectively communicating the gospel with people of the 'Net' generation, and facilitating their discipleship, presents the greatest challenge to cross-cultural missions since the apostolic era. The challenge then was to communicate the Gospel of a Jewish Messiah to a gentile world that had no prior interest in any such information. Most members of the definitively Jewish Church of the apostolic period at best had a centripetal conceptualization of witness: if Gentiles wished to become a part of the messianic community, they would need to appropriately move into the Jewish space of early Christianity and become socialised there.

The Book of Acts and the letters of Paul in particular show how the Holy Spirit drove the Church towards a radically different conceptualization of Christian missions, a centrifugal model. The Gospel was to be carried by its witnesses from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. This created irreconcilable tensions, misunderstandings, and conflict, threatening the Church with irrevocable fragmentation were it not for the robust theology and tireless pastoral engagement of the apostles. To them, especially Paul, *the call to evangelistic witness* demanded the willingness to "become all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22). At the same time *the responsibility of evangelical discipleship* demanded that they eschew any tendency towards a divided Christianity (1 Corinthians 1:13; Galatians 3:28).

In order to pursue their Great Commission mandate more efficiently, the apostles utilized the 'latest' technology available to them; most notably the efficient means of transportation of the Roman road network, and the Greco-

Roman conventions of letter-writing. This same logic is seen with the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, when the latest invention of the printing press enabled the new movement to scale up the propagation of its core beliefs.

The onset of the digital age similarly affords to the church unprecedented opportunities to evangelize millions who may otherwise be both physically and culturally beyond reach. Technology allows us the opportunity to create and distribute the evangelistic message, faster and much farther. This utilitarian value of tech, however, must be accompanied by a deep commitment to the interpersonal nature of the evangelistic task, because ultimately evangelism is about lost, confused, sinful and broken people discovering the good news of the Saviour through the witness of those who will identify with them.⁴³ Furthermore, Christian witness must be carried out in its essentially cross-cultural spirit, which means the church must make the necessary effort to learn the ‘language’ and ‘culture’ of her audience in order to be understood.⁴⁴

Discipling people in digital spaces similarly demands a re-evaluation of our present paradigms and strategies. For example, it is a “fundamental premise of social media that physical presence is not required”. The latter challenges the notion, that has existed for centuries, that disciple-making is a ministry done only through face-to-face encounters, individually or in small-group settings, within the context of the ‘local’ church or another ‘local’ Christian ministry.

Upon reflection, however, it is evident that even Paul was often severely limited in regard to physical proximity,

43. “In digital evangelism there needs to be a balance between the clear, compelling and coherent delivery of the gospel message and nurturing authentic relationships”, <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology> Internet accessed 09 June 2025.

44. “[T]he church needs to reflect on how to articulate and embody the gospel not only in digital spaces but also is a cultural condition increasingly shaped by the digital. This means striving to become conversant in digital spaces, understanding the logic of different platforms, each with their own microcosms, social conventions, and languages”, <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology> Internet accessed 09 June 2025.

due to distance or imprisonment. Such limitations did not prevent him from pursuing his ministry aspirations to “make disciples of all nations”; *he resorted to the technology of the day* – letter-writing and the Roman Road network – to reach churches, including those in Colossae and Laodicea whom Paul had never even seen, so as to facilitate their deeper growth towards greater faithfulness to Christ. Paul’s innovative, begin-with-the-end-in-mind approach may help us adopt a more positive approach to facilitating Christian formation and growth in a digital world.

Technology has enabled the proliferation of ‘digital tools such as prayer-apps, podcasts, online forums and digitized Bibles’,⁴⁵ which have proven to be hugely beneficial to Christian formation and pastoral care ministry.

We must also recognize that the profound shift to ‘networked society’ means that people are no longer locked into just one, local, homogenous fellowship; in digital culture individuals belong to multiple groups on the basis of shared interests and personal affinity. This requires Christian leaders and mentors to eschew hierarchy and see themselves as facilitators of community and curators of content, assisting young believers to develop the character and the skills to live as effective disciples within networked society.⁴⁶

Two additional benefits for discipling that is afforded by digitality must be noted. The first is that it may be a unique blessing for isolated Christians living out their faith as a minority religion in the context of majority (and even hostile) religious cultures. Digitality provides unlimited potential to connect with the wider, even global, church for fellowship, study, worship and acts of mission. Second, unlike traditional, ‘local’ Christian communities, those who sign up to participate in online Christian communities will more likely do so due to a *very high level of personal motivation*, because life on the net is predicated on individual choice, and people ‘show up’ because they genuinely want to do so. This high level of personal

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

investment can create the conditions for more effective mentoring of young Christians to become radical and productive disciples of Jesus Christ.

7. A Connected Generation and a Disconnected Church

The sheer inescapability of digital technology means that it is important for churches and youth leaders to learn not only to recognize but even to take advantage of the good aspects of digital technology in discipling youth.⁴⁷

The challenges and the opportunities posed to the Church by the digital world may have more similarity, than usually granted, to the issues faced by the apostles. Most Christian leaders and decision makers belong to a generation older and culturally strange to the Millennials. How these leaders choose to respond to the reality of a single humanity occupying two lived-spaces, developing two different patterns of behaviour and creating two very distinct models of community, will determine the opportunities for Gospel-influence in the unfolding human drama.

Sadly though, there is a global disconnect between the Church and the Net Generation. Unlike the speed with which she utilised the Roman Road network and Greco-Roman letter-writing conventions in the first century, or the way she exploited the scaling-up potential offered by the printing press in the sixteenth century, the church of the twenty-first century runs the risk of having to play catch up in the age of the information super highway:

Whenever a new technology hits the market, the Church's first reaction is to think that it is relevant only for commercial purposes. It happened with radio, then TV and now it is happening with Social Media.⁴⁸

Our ambivalence and neglect has not only distanced

47. Huong Nam, *Digital Media and Youth Discipleship*, 203.

48. Lazarus, Natchi. *The Connected Church: A Social Media Communication Strategy Guide for Churches, Nonprofits and Individuals in Ministry* (p. 55). Natchi Lazarus. Kindle Edition.

Christianity from unreached youth, it has led to staggering numbers of Christianised young people exiting church communities at speed. This is seen in the phenomenon of the rising numbers of *Nones* in previously highly-Christianised societies such as Europe, North America and South Korea. ‘Nones’ are those who check ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’ or ‘nothing in particular’ when asked to indicate their religious affiliation. In the US this number has grown from single digits in the 1990s to 28% of the population.⁴⁹ Soon it is expected to be the largest ‘religious’ grouping in the country. This has also been a worrying trend in South Korea, the theatre of the most dramatic Christian revival of the late twentieth century. Many from the second-generation are opting to disaffiliate from the church.

According to the national census report released in 2015, the majority (56.1 percent) of South Koreans are not affiliated to any particular religion, marking an increase by 9 percent since 2005. The percentage of ‘nones’ is higher among younger adults, with its share reaching 64.9 percent among people in their 20s, than people in their 60s (57.7 percent) or 70s (58.2 percent).⁵⁰

‘Nones’ are a growing factor in all societies, as traditions of religious and cultural authority get reordered online. This then provides the church with great opportunities for Gospel-engagement as previously tightly controlled communities give way and their members pursue greater freedom, openness, and collaboration. In fact, it has been one of the reasons for the dramatic growth of the Church in places like Iran, where internet and social media provided the only access to millions who had otherwise been beyond missional reach.

49. “Religious ‘Nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe”, Pew Research Centre, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/> Internet accessed 12 April 2025.

50. Steve Sang-Cheol Moon, “Reaching the World’s Nonreligious”, <https://lausanne.org/globalanalysis/reaching-the-worlds-rising-nonreligious>.

Natchi Lazarus speaks about eight key characteristics of the 'Connected Audience' (he is careful though to explain that the Connected Audience is not restricted to a particular generation):

1. Access to information – “when in doubt they Google”
2. Eager to learn and research
3. Always connected (to each other, church, ministry and world) – “restless when they do not have connectivity”
4. Open to other opinions and point of view
5. Values convenience
6. Willing to be your brand ambassador or evangelist
7. Are not exclusively yours
8. Appreciate uniqueness and value⁵¹

Leveraging these factors can help the Church navigate the challenges and opportunities to witness and make disciples in the digital world:

Social media can be an important tool to help us fulfil this mission. Thanks to the internet and social media, this generation is better equipped to fulfil the Great Commission than any other generation that ever existed.⁵²

But herein is the rub. Many in the Church are struggling to know how to evaluate the merits and demerits of the digital world. The fact that critical aspects of human life – such as presence and embodied actions in relationships – are non-transferable raises important theological and existential questions. A recent work that addresses some of the most

51. Natchi Lazarus, *The Connected Church* (Natchi Muthu Lazarus, 2017), 48-53.

52. Lazarus, *The Connected Church*, 65

frequently asked questions about the Church in a digital age came out in 2022. Its theological and pragmatic approach is insightful, as the paper addresses several issues such as: the question of a ‘disembodied’ Church, authentic community, worship (and communion) online, leadership, ethics, and missional opportunities.⁵³

The overall thrust of the paper is the importance of recognizing the immense potential of the digital world for witness and discipleship.⁵⁴ Regardless of the choices made concerning the application of digital technology in the life of the church, we are witnessing radical cultural changes in the wake of the digital revolution. There are, as such, larger contextual questions of how faith is shaped and communicated in societies saturated by technology. How to remain a faithful witness in a digital age is something that the church will have to continue to grapple with in the years to come.⁵⁵

The authors of “Christian Faith and Technology” (2024) conclude with a reflection on the challenges facing the Church in an increasingly technological age:

The development of AI highlights the urgent demand for the kind of reflection that we have sought to demonstrate in this paper. A central argument that we have advanced is that whether we use the technology or not, its wider societal, cultural, and spiritual ramifications cannot be ignored. Whilst we need to encourage the church to explore the affordances of technological tools,

53. Jonas Kurlberg, Vo Huong Nam and Sara Afshari, *Being Church in a Digital Age* (Lausanne Occasional Paper 68) 2022. This was followed up by a Lausanne occasional paper titled, “Christian Faith and Technology” (2024), <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology>

54. Kurlberg et al, *Being Church in a Digital Age*, 21: “Regardless of the choices made concerning the application of digital technology in the life of the church, we are witnessing radical cultural changes in the wake of the digital revolution. There are, as such, larger contextual questions of how faith is shaped and communicated in societies saturated by technology. How to remain a faithful witness in a digital age is something that the church will have to continue to grapple with in the years to come”.

55. Kurlberg et al, *Being Church in a Digital Age*, 21.

the key question is how do we live faithfully and missionally in a technological world.⁵⁶

8. Conclusion

It is now some decades since that pivotal moment in my journey in Christian leadership. The apostolic model for Christian ministry – to *witness to the good news* and to *make disciples of Jesus Christ* – remains our unchanging imperative, and, like the early Christians, each succeeding generation of the Church has had to apply these priorities according to the particular contextual realities that confronted them. The history of Christianity, then, is the story of how successful the Church was in carrying out her mandate in proclamation and pastoral care.

In this paper we have argued that from the turn of the twenty-first century, with the launch of the internet, the contextual reality of people has changed globally. Cyberspace has created the possibility of humans living simultaneously within a reality that can only be described as an ‘alternate’ place of being. This means that our social and cultural context has dramatically altered as we find ourselves moving seamlessly in and out of two spheres of living: the old, familiar world of physicality and the new, serendipitous world of digitality.

With the rise of the Millennials and the generations following, the world has gone through a ‘seismic shift’, as larger numbers in society now consider digital spaces as their primary ‘place’; the ‘world’ in which they live, learn, and love.

With 52 percent of all humans on the planet being less than 30 years of age, digital space, with its ubiquitous cultural norms, may be construed as the great frontier for Christian mission ever since *Jewish* apostles like Paul looked across at the unsaved world of Gentile peoples. Those who dedicated themselves to the Gentile-mission encountered unprecedented challenges in the contextualization of

56. <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/christian-faith-and-technology> Internet accessed 12 April 2025.

the gospel message and inculturation among non-Jewish peoples. The rapid spread of the Christian faith in the early centuries, against all odds, is a testament to the dedicated creativity of the early Christians to this missionary cause.

In the present context of the digital world and the prospects of a rapidly changing, tech-induced world, the Church is summoned afresh to a similar, dedicated creativity to undertake the work of *witness* and *discipleship* among the unreached millions of the 'Net-generation'.

Yet, these priorities cannot be considered except against the backdrop of recent evangelical Christianity's 'fruitfulness in witness and failure in discipleship'. In other words, global evangelicalism, which has shown remarkable strength and enterprise in the proclamation of the gospel, must urgently prioritize the 'means' by which she may develop and demonstrate a credible model of Christian discipleship and mature Christian living. Failure to do so may replicate in the unexplored digital world the vulnerability of first-generation Christian spirituality in the global south today: "a mile wide and an inch deep".