

# LEONARD SWEET

*Author of *The Gospel According to Starbucks**

# VIRAL

**How Social Networking  
Is Poised to Ignite Revival**

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Is Poised to Ignite Revival



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VIRAL

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is a little-known phenomenon called change blindness. When two similar but not identical pictures of a scene are shown in rapid succession, we can fail to notice quite substantial differences and changes. It is possible for us to still see the old picture even when we are looking at an almost totally new scene. More than we care to admit, perceptions are predictive hypotheses. Said another way: we see what we were looking for.

Certain people have helped me fight my change blindness. I dedicated this book to one of them. Aaron Linne solicited his followers on Twitter to nominate those authors/pastors/musicians who should be on Twitter, but weren't. When my name appeared, he e-mailed me and challenged me to take being called out by the Twitterati seriously. Not only that, he engaged me in a conversation about social networking that showcased my change blindness.

Don Heatley, church planter and videographer of my pioneering *AquaChurch* videos, reinforced what Aaron was telling me by introducing me to the concept of “persistence of vision.” Our minds can fill in the blanks between the twenty-four frames per second, the threshold that changes photography into videography. Video/film captures reality as a series of stills, when the truth is that reality was never still in the first place. What if our notions of truth are indeed “24 fps” samples of reality, Heatley asked, and we sample parts of reality into easily manageable stills but never capture the infinite motion of the whole continuous stream?

The rest, as they say, is history.

Charlie Chaplin, when asked the secret of his success, replied that it was “sheer perseverance to the point of madness.”<sup>1</sup> The people who shared my madness in writing this book were my agent, Mark Sweeney; my research assistant, Betty O'Brien; my editor, Ron Lee; and my coauthor on novels, Lori Wagner. All of them kept me believing in this project.

I almost dedicated this book to my brother John, a Presbyterian minister in the Philadelphia presbytery, who keeps arguing the Gutenberg case in my ear. You might say I wrote this book to change his mind.

It is the role of family not to allow our preconceptions to fill in the blanks and create the illusion that we have captured the whole of truth. Whenever I started to project my

snippets of reality on them (whose minds, in turn, fill in those blanks again); whenever I started to mistake the optical illusion of my projected shadows to stand for the real thing without any checks and balances, Elizabeth, Thane, Soren, and Egil were quite willing to bust up my “persistence of vision.” It’s the greatest gift they could give me.

—Leonard Sweet  
Orcas Island

## Introduction

# THE ANATOMY OF HUMAN LONGING

**T**he Christian life is neither Christian nor any kind of life unless we are living out our faith. And faith is not static or regimented. It is viral, and as dynamic and organic as life itself.

Your life and your experience of God will differ from mine in significant ways. But like every human on earth, we share the basic needs of nourishment, shelter, and a network of companions. These longings and pursuits shape us, even when we are not consciously aware of them. Incubating within us is the desire to reach out in order to fill our biological and relational needs. We gather food, find shelter, and do all we can to avoid being alone.

We may laugh at the Delbert McClinton song “If You Don’t Leave Me Alone (I’ll Find Somebody That Will),” but no one truly wants to be left alone. We sense that alone means lonely, and loners are losers in the lottery of life. Beyond that, something inside us pushes us to connect with others. We know that being alone means being miserable. The great poet W. H. Auden predicted the feared manner of his death: “alone at midnight, in a hotel, to the great annoyance of the management.”<sup>1</sup> He died of a heart attack in a hotel in Vienna, on September 28, 1973. Alone.

Connection is one of the absolutes of life. We don’t choose it; it is hard-wired within us. Just as neurons that are unable to connect with other neurons will die, so abandoned souls will atrophy and die. Our well-being depends on our ability to connect with other

humans. This drive pushes us with as much force as the longing for self-expression, our attraction to stories and storytelling, and the core human urge to know others and to be known. These are not all the things that make us human, but taken together they go a long way toward defining a human being as God created us.

Nature and nurture, destiny and design, shape the way we approach God and the way we live our faith. But it is not only who we are that determines the default setting of our lives (the ways we act and react, how we think). Also shaping us is the culture in which we live. In fact, the theory of neuroplasticity argues that the structure of the human brain is somehow shaped by our experiences, technologies, and cultures.

Admittedly, the word *culture* is one of the most slippery terms used in the social sciences. In fact, a founder of the field of culture studies, Raymond Williams, called the word *culture* one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. When I refer to culture, I mean primarily the unvarnished vernacular of a place or period. In the 1960s, when middle-class youth wanted to rebel, they grew beards and smashed stereos. When Amish youth wanted to protest in the 1960s, they shaved their beards and bought stereos. Culture shapes behavior and how we express our beliefs. Faith is not just a matter of logic and learning but of imagination and emotion and culture.

## LIFE, FAITH, AND THE DIGITAL AGE

If you are reading this, you almost certainly are a holdover from the twentieth century. You were born toward the end of the last millennium and, without even trying, you bring into this new era some of the trappings of the previous era. For purposes of this discussion, we will refer to two families (or tribes, if you prefer) that populate the twenty-first century. Both arrived here from the last century, but one group is rooted in the past and the other is fully at home in the new world, which encompasses the present as well as what can be seen on the horizon.

We know time is constant, but in recent years it seems time started moving much more quickly. Here is a simple example from just a decade ago. Back then, when travelers were waiting for a flight, they would occupy themselves with people watching, talking, reading a book or magazine, staring into space, or relaxing. Now think about the last time you were waiting for a flight. What were other travelers doing to fill the time? They were watching Hulu, sending pictures to friends, perfecting PowerPoints, creating photoshopped photos, texting, tweeting, on Facebook, and checking e-mail.

The culture has gone digital, but as recently as 1979, the then-current edition of *The*

*Chambers Dictionary* (TCD) defined *digital* only as “pertaining to the fingers, or to arithmetical digits.” If you are native to the Digital Age, think about this: the word *digital* had an entirely different meaning when your parents were in college, or getting married, or starting to think about adding you to the family.

The tribe that feels most at home in the twenty-first-century Digital Age is what we will call the Googlers—the digitized, globalized group that spends much of its life getting to know one another in a virtual world. The tribe that immediately precedes the Googlers we will refer to as the Gutenbergs—those who arrived from the twentieth century bringing with them influences and assumptions launched long before, in the fifteenth century. Gutenbergs believe they were shaped primarily by the space race, John Kennedy, the Cold War, and the Beatles. They are largely unaware of a more basic influence that determines their approach to life and faith. They are the product of the movable-type technology perfected by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1400s.<sup>2</sup>

If Gutenbergs still prefer to read a book that is printed on paper, rather than on an iPad, at least credit them with being loyal to the namesake.

## WHY GUTENBERG IS SUCH A BIG ICEBERG

When the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls became widely known in the late 1940s, biblical scholars were eager to examine what grew to be a library of very early, hand-copied biblical texts. Comparisons of the scrolls’ hand-lettered words with modern translations of the Hebrew Scriptures showed remarkable consistency. Painstaking copying by hand had preserved the integrity of the biblical text over millennia. Christians can be thankful that Essenes and others who honored the words of Scripture used more than just their thumbs in copying the texts.

For nearly fifteen hundred years the Scriptures (Jewish and Christian) were preserved by the time-consuming process of hand copying. This served to keep the sacred text in circulation, but it was a very limited circulation. The laborious copying process meant there simply were not enough scrolls or codex produced for mass distribution. The available copies were read aloud and listened to, a system well-suited to a largely illiterate population.

That began to change in the 1400s, when technology took a breathtaking leap. Johannes Gutenberg came up with a way to produce books by hand, but through a process that avoided hand copying. Instead, movable type was used to reproduce words, sentences, entire books. His printing press introduced a radical advance in the mass production of books.

The first book created on the first movable-type printing press was the Bible. Gutenberg's technology eventually resulted in the wide availability of affordable editions of the Scriptures. If any invention deserves the accolade "revolutionary," give it to the printing press of Johannes Gutenberg.

The first Bible came off press around the year 1439, and the Protestant Reformation followed some eighty years later. Launched by Augustinian monk Martin Luther's list of ninety-five points issued in Wittenburg, Germany, the Reformation owes more than a little of its success to printing and the technological advances of Gutenberg and the Italian printer Aldus Manutius, who in 1501 introduced the pocket-sized octavo format. This miniaturized the book and brought reading out of libraries into everyday lives.

Think how omnipresent printing has become. Just about every home has its own

### **Are You More Googler or Gutenberg?**

We're all part of a tribe, and the two we'll be looking at in this book are Googlers and Gutenbergs. There is a loose tribal correlation to your age, but a much higher correlation between tribe and your worldview, daily habits and practices, assumptions, and values. Use these questions to determine which culture you're most comfortable in:

1. Have you sent a handwritten note to someone in the past six months?
2. Have you mastered enough acronyms for quick and efficient texting?
3. Have you written a check to pay a bill in the past two months?
4. Have you used a postage stamp in the last six months?
5. In the last month, have you written in cursive beyond just your signature?
6. If you misplaced your cell phone, could you still send e-mail and cruise the Internet?
7. When you're at home, does an incoming phone call require use of your cell?
8. Have you been listed in a phone book in the last three years?

printing press hooked up to a laptop or desktop computer. But with more and faster ways to circulate written data electronically, most of us don't bother to print documents. We still are wed to words, but we access them in ways we couldn't have imagined at the turn of the twenty-first century.

### *When Technology Changed the World*

Why all the talk about text, printing, Gutenberg, and movable type? The first printing technology in the West is critical for one reason: the ability to print books on a mass scale reoriented the world, including the Christian world. And it wasn't just by producing pamphlets that advanced the teachings of Luther and Calvin and Zwingli, although that didn't hurt. But the impact was more far-reaching and sustained. Printing fueled

9. If the battery in your mobile device went dead, could you read the most recent book you purchased?
10. Do you watch television programs when they are first shown and on a conventional television set (not a laptop screen or mobile device)?
11. Have you looked up a number or address using a telephone book in the last three years?
12. Do you use a pencil or pen to keep a journal?

*Scoring:* Count your yes answers to questions 2 and 7 and your no answers to 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. Multiply the sum by two. Total score A = \_\_\_\_\_.

Count your yes answers on questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and your no answers on 2 and 7. Divide the sum by two. Total score B = \_\_\_\_\_. Now add A and B. Combined score = \_\_\_\_\_.

The higher your score, the less Gutenberg you are in your everyday habits. And it is likely that changing your habits also is changing the way you think about life, faith, and relationships. So just how Googler or Gutenberg are you? A score of six rivals Johannes Gutenberg himself. A score between six and twelve puts you in transition mode, adopting some Googler practices. A score of thirteen to twenty-four is full-on Googler. You must be a Digital Age native.

the spread of Christianity and helped form its character and practice by underscoring the power and importance of words over images. Cartoonist James Thurber would complain of this dominance of word over image in these words: “A drawing is always dragged down to the level of its caption.”

The Gutenberg tribe is unapologetically grounded in text, and I use *text* here as a noun. Long ago they accepted as a primary mission the task of getting the printed Word of God into the hands of members of every language group on the planet. Preachers love to hold a thick Bible aloft and shout that the words in this book are the source of life. Gutenbergers love words printed on paper and books bound between covers sitting on shelves. In Gutenberg Christianity, the text that backs up belief (the Bible) tends to receive as much emphasis (if not more) as the daily life of faith. Words are on a par with living out one’s beliefs.

### GOOGLERS OF THE WORLD, CONNECT

The other tribal culture, the Googlers, would be hard-pressed to pick Johannes Gutenberg out of a police lineup. But they have taken his invention and extended it to uses and applications that changed not only the way people read and access information but the way people relate to one another. I have far more friends whom I’ve never met than I have friends in face-to-face relationships. Googlers have rewritten the rules of forming networks, connections, and relationships. In the hands of Googlers, technology has been bent to the purposes of core human longings: knowing, being known, belonging, perception. A primary way these things happen in Googler Culture is through the use of metaphors for storytelling, story catching, and story sharing. The technology of Googler Culture, advancing at a faster rate than any other in history, takes its cues more from premodern times than from the movable-type technology that helped launch the modern era. Googlers harken back to the era of Jesus. And it’s no accident that Jesus serves as the world’s leading storyteller. He excelled at connecting people to one another, to himself, to creation, and to God.

We are all singing with Johnny Cash “I’m Bound for the Promised Land,”<sup>3</sup> but you can’t be eternity bound without being earth based and time bound. And the bindings of our time are more Googler than Gutenberger. This transition to a new culture has created a myriad of problems. Gutenbergers criticize Googlers for being shallow, obsessed with games, narcissistic, and irresponsible. They like to characterize Digital Age natives as perpetual adolescents who confuse status updates with authentic, legitimate human relationships.

But is that an accurate assessment? As I look at the waning of Gutenberg Culture and the arrival of Google Culture, I have to wonder if Jesus wouldn't be more at home with the Googlers. In fact, as the Western church built by Gutenbergs continues to lose ground in a world of Googlers, I am convinced that Christians need to start taking cues from the Googlers. Even more, I sense a Googler inside many a Gutenberg, crying to get out and pursue relationship with others. But the inner Googler in too many cases is held back by fear and uncertainty.

Humans are driven to belong, find acceptance, connect with others, and share life. This is true of Gutenbergs and Googlers alike, but Googlers freely admit it. How many cultures in history have devoted so much effort, invention, time, and passion to building networks that offered no payoff beyond engaging with other people? This is getting pretty close to pure relationship, when connecting is its own reward. No one is trying to sell me a timeshare or recruit me into their multilevel marketing program.

Googlers talk about their day and ask others about their lives. Maybe they talk about music or ideas, or they play chess via the Internet. These things used to occur over the backyard fence or in the family rec room. Now they occur across national borders and create bonds among people who will never meet face to face. If "necessity knows no law" (Aquinas), desire for connection knows no bounds.

### IF "GOOGLE IS GOD," IS GOD GOOGLE?

I don't knock Gutenbergs; I was born into that culture. In many ways it still feels familiar and comfortable to me, like walking through an airport terminal and overhearing an accent that reminds me of home. I used to dream of what it would be like to have a collection of one hundred record albums (called LPs for "long playing"). Now Googlers have ten thousand "favorite" songs on an iPod. I'm still learning the language and links of Googler Culture: I was no sooner transported by the blue line of hyperheaven than I crashed from the blue screen of death. I am so Gutenberg in background that I still believe that to write well is to make a better world.

Gutenbergs have held sway in the world—and in the Christian world—for hundreds of years. They launched the modern missions movement and recast the Bible in more languages (and multiple versions of the English language) than ever before. They put the gospel on radio and television and in the movies. They built churches that resemble college campuses with an indoor minimall. The contributions of Gutenbergs to a global civilization? Religious tolerance, rule of law, freedom of speech and press. Humanity leaves these behind at its peril.

Gutenbergers figured out how to apply the practices of USAmerican business (the most advanced form of capitalism) to the operation of the church, and introduced an allegiance to bigger and better as the most reliable measure of effective ministry. Gutenberg churches became citadels of command and control. No one would accuse Gutenbergers of lacking resourcefulness, devotion to the cause, single-mindedness, or confidence. I could take you to fifty churches around USAmerica with which any community college would gladly trade facilities. You don't build a state-of-the-art church on 120 acres if you're not sold out to the vision of providing a niche for every person. A gym for the athletes, art classes for the artsy, a coffee bar for the Javalujahs!, kids' programs cradle roll through high school, singles, seniors, bikers, runners, crafters, skateboarders, and fans of Bible study.

In a niche-or-be-niched world, what better way to help people belong than to offer them multiple options tailor-made to fit their hobby, athletic inclination, taste in pastries, or yearning to scrapbook?

Googlers are doing a similar thing, but starting from the other end of the equation. They first create a community and invite everyone in. Once people are interacting in the community (most often online or by Twitter or text message), they are invited to share who and what they are. Passions, interests, areas of knowledge and expertise, likes and dislikes, questions, needs, joys. It all comes out as the longings of being human come to the fore. If you want to shoot a round of golf, you can do that too. But Googlers won't build a golf course just so you'll have a place to belong.

In my experience, Googlers lack the Gutenberg drive to make it on your own, to be dependent on no one else, to stand tall and make your own way in the world and succeed or fail completely on your own. The John Wayne gene doesn't seem to have carried over to the Googlers. Instead, they are drawn to 140-character updates from friends and strangers who talk about a great movie they saw, or present an idea worth considering, or toss out a question to ponder or a reason to celebrate. To Gutenbergers, this seems way too surfacey and even useless. Why waste time, technology, and your battery on such drivel?

God promised that anyone who seeks God with their whole heart will find God.<sup>4</sup> Gutenbergers are wholehearted about a lot of things, and history records their accomplishments. No one surpasses Gutenberg Culture when it comes to applying yourself and accomplishing goals. But somehow, relationships were relegated to a different category—the nice-to-have-but-not-crucial category. Building something or improving it or advertising it or promoting it took priority. In the words of Walter Gropius, in his *Bauhaus Manifesto*, “The ultimate aim of all creative activity is a building!” Creativity issues in

artifacts and achievements, not relationships. Gutenbergers have been far more concerned about rectitude of thoughts about God than they have on rectitude of relationship with God.

Googlers, as well, are creative, innovative, passionate, committed, and productive. They are not against progress. Witness the iPad 2, full-color e-readers that link to video clips and sound effects, phones that do everything but wash your laundry. Technology is the holy handmaiden of Google Culture and they excel in it.

But the motivation and driving force for Googlers is not to build something huge and expensive that the masses will admire. Instead, they are driven to develop and use technology in ways that improve lives. A Googler would not think it wise to build a church that is so large it requires the installation of an escalator. They have no desire to bask in the reflected glory of a multimillion-dollar artifact. To them, artifactual is the artificial without more and better relationships, defined as networking, sharing, connecting, belonging, and letting others get to know you.

Is bigger really better, or is smaller and more convenient the way to go when it enhances relationships and connection? What lies at the core of our humanness—the grandiose or the simple? Don't we all long to return to the direct simplicity of God walking in the dew of the day with Adam and Eve? I'm not saying that all Googlers, or even most of them, pursue connections because they are pursuing God. For many, it is not intentional. But a wise Scripture writer mentioned that God put eternity into every person's heart.<sup>5</sup> Every culture bears the "seeds of the Word"—the Spirit of God keeps alive in humanity the innate desire to be united with God. That desire of union with God is true of Googlers and Gutenbergers alike.

Yet Googlers are the ones who have made relationships a life mission. Googlers are the ones more likely to trust that the common good in the long run is the personal good. And Googlers are most ready to take seriously what any scientist, when pinned to the wall to say what anything is—whether a gland or a galaxy, a lepton or a lemur—ends up saying: a system of relationships.

## GOD AND RELATIONSHIPS AND BEING HUMAN

The teenage granddaughter of a minister friend reported to her grandparents that she'd prefer going to the traditional worship service with them because they sang out of books and she could see the music and not just the words. A hymnbook enabled her to sing notes other than the melody line. My research assistant, Betty O'Brien, was in conversation with the youthful praise team leader at her home church in California. A powerful

organ offertory moved him profoundly. He is a fan of new sounds, and he wanted to hear more.

So what keeps Googlers and Gutenbergers from finding common ground? We have seen that being human means we share the same longings, and those longings drive us toward relationship with others and ultimately toward God. So why the disconnect between these two cultures?

Fear does its dishonorable work, creating maladaptive responses instead of metabolic ones. Never underestimate the power of fear geared up and egged on by ego to keep us from moving forward. There is an old saying that some people are so fearful of change, had they been present at creation they would have voted for chaos. Fear causes us to hide in the face of change, and it leads to living a reactive rather than constructive life. The choice is to be an active part of positive change, which already is upon us, or to passively and grudgingly tolerate inevitable change. This “such a time” moment has a right to expect that we won’t be satisfied to sit on the sidelines but that we will initiate and participate in change. The future cannot afford an AWOL church. Jesus gave us a love we can trust, even in the face of our fears.

Al Caldwell is a friend of a friend. He was scheduled to preach one Sunday and called the church in advance to talk to someone about details. The person’s cell phone kept cutting out. Finally, the person at the other end of the line apologized: “Sorry, sir, this is a dead zone!”

How many of us live in a dead zone? How many churches are dead zones to the future? Al’s response was immediate: “Someone get me a trumpet, a bugle, an alarm clock, and an electronic Bible so we can move out of the dead zone and bring some life and energy to this place.”<sup>6</sup>

This book is a tale of two tribes: Gutenbergers and Googlers. I will tell a bit about each tribe, both the pros and the cons, and will trace some tracks of how they intersect in our world. Each tribe has its promises, perils, potentials, and problems. Each tribe has some baggage we could lose and some we should hold on to. Clearly the future belongs to the Googlers, but not for long. The world of Google and its contemporary technologies will have its day, and then another culture will be born. But for the next two decades, the primary missional challenge of the church will be to incarnate the gospel in a Google world.

Of all the pictures in the National Gallery of London, more than one-third are religious, and more than half of them portray the face of Christ in various times and climes.<sup>7</sup> This is where we begin: imagining the face of Christ in the Digital Age, the world of the Googlers.

# PART I



# Where Are We?

## LOGOS AND LOGO

### Is the Gospel Personal Connection or Heated Argument? Your Answer Will Tell You Something

All the mischief of the world is done by one thing; the inability to remain at rest within one's own room.

—BLAISE PASCAL, *Pensées*

I entered the world as a Gutenberg, and I share a deep devotion to the written and spoken word. But I wrestle with the Gutenberg Culture's use of words, and sometimes even its use of the Word. Gutenbergs proceed from a fixed point, which helps explain why they are drawn to objective facts, unimpeachable research, and hard statistics. For them, words serve much the same purpose as a mathematical proof. There is a feeling of certainty that comes with precise words and piercing definitions.

Googlers also are big fans of words, but they approach them differently. To a Googler, words are important because they help a person express ideas, share news, and tell stories. Words can establish common ground and reveal shared interests. Instead of serving as a tether or anchor to a fixed point, for Googlers words are agents of change, experiments in conversation, small change in the coinage of the new realm of unmediated, interactive, unscripted connection.

Words can be signposts erected to mark the location of incontrovertible truths. They also can be messengers and emissaries. They can be mile markers to show you where you are or vehicles that take you to the place you've been striving to reach. Words can show you where you are or where you are going. They can tether you to an unvarying point of reference or move you into unmarked territory.

Googlers are not as interested in proving a point as they are in making connections. Trust me, 800 million-plus human beings from around the world do not log on to Facebook so they can get into an argument. They do it to be connected to other people.

### LOGOS THAT LEAD TO *LOGOS*

I playfully date the origin of Googler Culture to 1973, the year the mobile phone was invented. I was an early adopter. My first mobile device was a bag phone, so named because it was so big it came with its own body bag. When I would meet someone for lunch, the phone required its own chair at the table. (*Mobile* was used loosely when it came to this monstrosity.) Still, the invention of a telephone that was not dependent on a wall plug, not fixed to a location, and small enough to be taken with you throughout the day accomplished much more than convenience in communicating. It ushered in a new era, what I am calling the TGIF era (more on this later). The connected generation was born when inventor Martin Cooper called up his AT&T rival on an unplugged telephone from the streets of New York City.

While I was an early adopter, I'm still an immigrant in Googler Culture. I earn my keep with words, hence I am logocentric. But Googler Culture has allowed me to expand and multiply the venues and voices. Like most of us, I am a microblogging, social-networking, apps-loving, tweeting USAmerican. I'm never happier than when I'm virtually present in multiple places at one time.

More important than all that, I am a Christian whose life is defined by the witness and words of Jesus. God is revealed to us in the words of sacred Scripture and in the Word, Jesus the Christ. Words are important. They reveal God, inspire faith, form lives, impart wisdom, give direction, and much more.

Christians of the first century did not have access to the full canon of Scripture. They had the same Bible Jesus had, the Hebrew Scriptures. And followers of The Way in various churches had a letter (or letters) from Paul, James, Peter, John, and the writer to the Hebrews. They were people of the Word, but they also were people of The Word Made Flesh and knew that they formed the body of Christ on earth. The members were

interdependent, of “one accord in prayer”—not in politics, propositions, or programs, but prayer.<sup>1</sup> Gatherings of Christians were communities of prayer, practice, participation, knowing, and being known.

We were missionaries, disciples, Jesuits.  
—KEITH RICHARDS, DESCRIBING WHAT IT WAS LIKE  
TO START THE ROLLING STONES WITH MICK JAGGER<sup>2</sup>

This is a fairly accurate description of the Googler world as well, both the believing and unbelieving segments. Googlers tend to live by values that early Christians would recognize. They believe there is more truth in relationships than in propositions. They yearn to do more than interact and stay in touch with others. They want to *share life* with others. They do not seek a spirituality that escapes flesh and blood. They understand that to be “incorporated” in a body is to be enfleshed, but an enfleshment that is not corporate but corporal. While Gutenberg Christians keep busy parsing a Greek root to uncover the exact meaning of “submit” in Ephesians 5, the Googlers of the world are friending another two hundred people, reading the twenty text messages that came in during the last ten minutes, and meeting someone for coffee. The Gutenberg church might think of Googlers as superficial and bent on wasting time, but what is superficial about devotion to relationships?

### CLIFFSNOTES TO TGIF CULTURE

As with any culture, there are natives and immigrants. Natives were born into the culture and, as a result, the culture’s identifying characteristics are largely invisible. You don’t think about oxygen; you just breathe it. If you’re a native English speaker, you don’t lie awake at night parsing *pare*, *pear*, *pair*, and *père*. But immigrants do. To them, the culture is exotic and often confusing. It’s interesting but unsettling. To Gutenbergs (but not Googlers), TGIF Culture is an odd thing that has happened in the world.

Meanwhile, TGIF Culture is invisible to Googlers. They operate within it without thinking about it. Googlers couldn’t imagine living any other way.

So what is this new culture? As we use it here, TGIF does not stand for Thank Goodness It’s Friday, nor is it the acronym for a chain of family restaurants. TGIF is the Googler Culture that is built on Twitter, Google, iPhone, and Facebook—the most visible and relied-upon tools of relationship and life.

Every Gutenberg is right now undergoing a brain transplant. Cognitive scientists credit the rise of TGIF Culture not only with changing the way we access information and communicate with one another but also with reformatting our brains. Researchers have found that surfing the Internet and having an overabundance of data at our fingertips recalibrates brain synapses.<sup>3</sup> It is called brain “plasticity.” An onslaught of tweet-length messages plus thirty-five hundred “sermons” (advertisements) a day selling us everything from hamburgers to Hampton Inns, plus texting while we’re Facebooking and IMing and checking e-mail and looking up movie times and doing a little online banking—all of this is taking its toll.

Your brain is being short-circuited and maybe even shorted by sound storms and data avalanches. Everybody is only too eager to share, and now they have multiple venues for instant self-expression. The prospect of sitting alone in a quiet room, pondering or ruminating or praying, is most people’s idea of torture. The prevailing ethos is to be connected 24/7, even if you hardly ever see one another in a physical sense.

Long gone are the days when a friend would send you a postcard from some faraway location and then return home before the postcard landed in your mailbox. Now we expect a moment-by-moment account of the friend’s travel adventure. (As with most things, being connected 24/7 is a two-edged sword. This could be considered an invasion when your parents want to get involved. Who wants to Skype with Mom and Dad when it involves sitting at your computer just so your parents can see you when you’re half-asleep and wearing a wrinkled T-shirt and pajama bottoms? Plus, they want you to keep sending them photos and clever videos, and even the GPS coordinates of your new apartment. You know if you give in, they’ll be at their desktop taking a street-level look at your building and calling to see if they can stop by for a visit.)

How did they miss the point that communication in TGIF Culture is largely virtual?

Distance is no obstacle to getting in touch—but  
getting in touch is no obstacle to staying apart.

—ZYGMENT BAUMAN

ON THE CELL-PHONE GENERATION<sup>4</sup>

And again, there is another side to this. I have found no empirical evidence that thumbing your way through life has advanced the scientific enterprise, or furthered art and culture, or done even one thing to enrich the use of language. Much of human

contact has been reduced to acronyms, misspelled words, emoticons, missing punctuation, and mindless replies to meaningless revelations. (I don't care what is on your grocery list and whether you took a nap this afternoon.) These things pass for conversation, a thing that used to thread the fabric of society. For many in TGIF Culture, it's more like stitches to close a wound, and we're wondering if it will leave a scar.

Educators wonder if children will soon stop learning the mechanics of printing the alphabet by hand. That skill is called upon so rarely, it's almost vestigial. (Already, cursive writing is in danger. How long is hand printing likely to survive?)

### FOR GOD SO LOVED A GOOGLER WORLD

If we had any doubts that God wants a relationship with us, Jesus's life on earth supplies the final proof. God didn't send us a treatise; God sent a Person. And in our culture, either Googler or Gutenberg, it's often hard to find Jesus amid the clutter of words. While it might seem that Googlers (the thumb-texting acronym crowd) treat words too lightly, they are driven to find and maintain connection with one another.

In their dogged tweeting, blogging, Facebooking, and IMing, Googlers have stumbled onto the heart of Christian faith and meaning. Oddly, they have arrived at a place that echoes the earliest Christians and their faith communities. I'm not saying that TGIF Culture is more consciously in tune with God than are the Gutenbergs. But I am saying that Googlers (of any age) recognize a need in their lives and they act on it. Repeatedly. Some would even say constantly.

While Googlers cannot be thrown off the relational scent, it can be argued that Gutenberg Christians never picked up the trail to begin with. Sure, if you go to church on Sunday you might hear talk about a personal relationship with Christ. And you might notice announcements of the meetings of small groups with the purpose of encouraging deeper relationships. But too often these are programmed and ultimately ineffective.

Gutenbergs might be more adept at describing in words what a relationship is and why it is needed. But Googlers are light-years ahead when it comes to the practicum. They pursue connection with a tenacity not seen since Elizabeth Taylor's sixth wedding. Googlers are driven to find meaning and touchpoints with others. I don't endorse the narcissistic sharing of personal minutiae, but I support sharing for the purpose of connecting. And so does God. There is nothing more boring than reading the memoirs and minutia of someone you don't care about. But there is nothing more exciting than reading the memoirs and minutia of someone you honestly care about.

I believe it is more natural to incarnate the gospel in TGIF Culture than in the world of the Gutenbergs. In other words, Googlers (be they disciples or not) are better positioned to encounter and engage with the Jesus of Scripture than Gutenbergs have been, since Gutenbergs were inclined to refashion the Jesus of Palestine into a Western-size-fits-all Savior. The church may wake up to find that Jesus's time has come in TGIF Culture because it is more organic than linear, more kinesis than stasis, more circle than square. For this reason, Googlers may be the best hope for the future of the church in the West.

Gutenbergs suited their times well. But in the Googler world—the age of experience, participation, image, and connection—Gutenbergs have proven to be unwilling to let go of their fixed position. Meanwhile Googlers, for a variety of reasons, are more adaptive to the future while being anchored in the past. To add to the sadness, many Gutenbergs are putting more and more distance between themselves and what God is doing in the world.

While Googlers expend enormous amounts of energy seeking to satisfy their urge to connect, Gutenberg Christians continue to pursue their fascination with terminologies, definitions, formulas, and what Sigmund Freud called “the narcissism of small differences.” While Googlers are getting by with acronyms and finding friends everywhere, Gutenbergs are delving into words about words that have been written about God's words. It's an overstatement, but in place of vulnerable, transparent, biblical relationships, Gutenbergs often choose a spiritual path that leads away from the practical outworking of life and faith and people.

### LET'S ASK A BIGGER QUESTION

Is Jesus a person or an assertion? Is he personal connection or heated argument? Several years ago I wrote a book that posed one central question: “How did Christians get the point and miss the Person?”<sup>5</sup> Now more than ever, the question needs to be answered because it captures the divide that exists between Christian cultures. At the same time, it reveals the elemental search for meaning and connection that drives Googlers in just about every area of life.

Neither Gutenberg nor Googler Culture is defined by demographics (age, income level, educational attainment, career or profession, ethnicity). Rather, we are looking at two cultures of very different psychographics. Gutenbergs are oriented toward clarity and certainty, which require finding answers to questions and solutions to mysteries.

They gain confidence from rectitude and exactitude. As a result, they value the texts of Scripture for the authoritative words and their apps.

The other culture, the one we're calling TGIF, uses the word *text* as a verb more than a noun. They text to keep in touch with other people. Texting is connection, belonging, self-expression, friendship, and community. It is a way to get to know others and to help them get to know you. Life and faith are best lived out when they invite others to join in. Life is at its best when it involves other people. Beliefs that are isolating or distancing from everyday experience might be interesting to think about, but as a way of life they are useless. Why would anyone think Christian faith should or could be divorced from relationships?

In later chapters we will look more closely at the contrasts between Gutenbergs and Googlers, and we will attempt to identify what each culture brings to the life of faith. Here are a few of the contrasts in summary.

## WORDS AND THE WORD

Gutenbergs value precision and rationality. In many ways their faith is the pursuit of details that explain the ways of God and the reasonableness of belief. They value the meaning of words and are confident that words serve to clarify truth and make God knowable.

It's not surprising that Gutenbergs are so attached to words. The printing revolution that was launched by Johannes Gutenberg rewrote the book on communication, information dispersal, education, rhetoric, and the propagation of religion. With the invention of movable type, the printed word became as central to the training of Christians as hand-lettered Torah scrolls had been to the ancient Jews.

I'll quote Marshall McLuhan here, since to not do so would make everyone wonder why. He is famous for saying that "the medium is the message."<sup>6</sup> He wrote a celebrated book using that phrase as the title, pointing out that the meaning of a message (what is communicated by words) is unavoidably shaped, altered, biased, and "massaged" by the delivery system—the medium. This is akin to the phenomenon of a laboratory researcher muddying the results of his research simply by being present as an observer. The researcher's body temperature affects the ambient room temperature. His breathing adds carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. His physical presence causes lab rats to behave in ways that vary from their activities when they are isolated from humans. Amazingly, science moved forward for generations without realizing that a neutral observer was in

truth an active participant in any experiment. The research data and resulting conclusions were automatically massaged by a researcher who thought he was doing nothing more than standing idly by.

Likewise, Gutenberg's movable type and the bound volumes it produced had the unplanned effect of intensifying the tendency among Christians to place their confidence in words. More than ever before, Christian ministries focused on the propagation and distribution of words. Proclaimed words had always held sway, as the Scriptures were read aloud whenever Christians gathered. But with the ability to mass-produce Bibles and books and to obtain them at affordable prices, Christians could study God's Word as well as words written about the Word. Depending on the stature and reputation of the commentator, words used to convey ideas about the words that God spoke could take on an authority of their own. If you don't believe me, talk to a Methodist about John Wesley, a Presbyterian about John Calvin, an Anabaptist about Menno Simons, an Episcopalian about Thomas Cranmer. Or read five current, popular-level Christian books and notice how many of the authors quote C. S. Lewis, Oswald Chambers, Augustine, or Billy Graham.

It is not wrong for monotheists to hold words in high regard, and especially the words of God. I will never argue against the power of words. I am, after all, a writer, speaker, and educator. But something—or, I should say, Someone—can get lost amid a multitude of words. God's most perfect, most glorious, most human, and yet most divine communication to us is Jesus, the Word made flesh. It is possible for the Word to be obscured by words. Emmanuel, God in human flesh, God with us! How can sheets of paper covered with type do justice to God's Son, the God-Human, Lord of the universe, and the living Expression of Three-in-One?

Printed text can never hope to capture the full meaning or the inexpressible glory of "the Word [who] became flesh and dwelt among us."<sup>7</sup> Is it possible that the Gutenberg fixation on precision and exactitude delivered by words might be preventing people from connecting with Christ and following his example in loving people?

## GOOGLERS AND DEPENDENCE ON TEXT

Googlers love words because words are expressive. They lie at the heart of communication and lead to connection. But Googlers also are sensitive to the abuse of words, knowing how words are manipulated to advance agendas and causes that contradict the plain teaching of Christ. Words are written and spoken and preached in ways that twist God's truth to support a fund-raising campaign or promote a cause or defend a theological

system. There is no question that words are powerful, influential, emotive, and dangerous. Words are useful tools, but words are not truth.

Jesus told us, using words, that he is the Truth. He is also the Word become flesh. You might have seen the bumper sticker that says, “I was looking for Jesus but got mugged by one of his followers.” Googlers, while not poster children for “God, save me from your people,” can document how the Gutenberger church has been getting it wrong for a long time.

In being able to read and write, Jesus traveled the information superhighway of his day. But he never departed from the way of connection and community. Even when he unleashed his harshest criticisms of temple leaders and teachers of the law, he met them on common ground, quoting Moses and Isaiah. He said, in essence, we spring from the same Source, the history of God and the prophets, the story of God’s people, but you guys have been getting the story all wrong.

So as we take a fresh look at the church in the Age of Google, we realize that too many Christians for far too long have been propping up the culture of Gutenberg. Rather than rooting the practice of Christian faith in the timeless, timely, and time-full ways of the Founder, the church in the West clings desperately to the canons of the Age of Reason. As we look at Googlers and their practice of Christianity, we see clear contrasts from the ways things have been done since Gutenberg’s famous invention.

Googlers are drawn to relationships as much as they are to ideas, which gives them a head start in the heart-first (not head-first) practice of Christianity. It is easier to talk to Googlers about Jesus than about five points of Calvinism or whether Israel still enjoys most-favored-nation status with God. The person of Jesus is more attractive than thoughts and teachings about Jesus.

If you are a Gutenberger, you might argue that what I’m saying can’t stand up to a strongly analytical approach to Christian belief and practice. I would agree. Hard analysis can cast doubt on just about anything. But I’m not advancing a new proof. I’m advocating a new view of Jesus that takes his personhood more seriously than the theological positions that read a lot like a job description for the Son of God. Let me suggest a series of contrasts:

Jesus is message more than manuscript.

He is story more than instruction manual.

He is a personal letter, not the envelope it comes in.

He is a launching pad, not a storage locker.

He is self-defining, not an entry in a Bible dictionary.

He is mystery, not equation.

He is the Transcendent made immanent, not systematic made simulation.

He is miracle more than logic and reason.

He is personal experience and direct reality, not a syllabus or lesson plan.

Jesus did not come to earth so that later generations of his followers could prove a point. He *is* the Point. He is time spent together, not a list of seven rules for success. He is intimacy, not statistical analysis. He brings unimaginable riches and spiritual wealth but never adds up on a balance sheet. Following him is messy yet holy.

Googlers intuitively are drawn to the real Jesus, the One who is not mediated by Gutenberg attempts to impose formulas and propositions and structure. The mess we call church has the greatest message in the world. But when the message is modified to emphasize the church and not to introduce Christ, the world can't hear our message for our mess.

## TALKING WITH YOUR THUMBS

Typesetting went digital not long before the wired culture went wireless. Wireless went to Cloud, and it won't be long before Skype will give way to avatars and holograms and teleporters. My concern is not the effect that evolving technology has on faith, but how culture (of which technology is a part) shapes Christian beliefs and forms biases, and the way Christianity is practiced in the context of culture.

Much is made of orthodox belief, and rightly so. Orthodoxy is crucial. But where in open-source culture is there a similar emphasis on the practice of our faith being open to the Source? The Gutenberg world has shaped the beliefs and practice of Western Christianity within the influence of the Enlightenment. In fact, "modern Christianity" is arguably more modern, more Gutenberg, than it is Christian. The life of the Spirit largely got lost amid facts and functionalities. Words became

weapons and a means to score points against an opponent, leaving behind a bombed-out, barren, infertile Christian landscape.

Something unknown is doing we don't know what.  
 —WERNER HEISENBERG'S UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE  
 AS EXPLAINED BY SIR ARTHUR EDDINGTON<sup>8</sup>

Whereas Jesus was fond of asking questions to draw out his listeners, words in the hands of Enlightenment Christians became a way to level accusations, to solidify positions, and to clarify who was and was not a member in good standing. These things went largely unchallenged in the Gutenberg church. Sadly, Gutenbergs failed to grasp the practical, relational, lived-out meaning behind all the right words. There are a lot of pastors out there with the right words and with the right theology but with no people. If you have the right theology but aren't reaching people and aren't in relationship with your culture, what does it profit a pastor or a church?

Meanwhile, Googlers recognize the reality of something inside them that has for too long gone unanswered, and the private pain of living under mushroom clouds of fear and despair that contaminate their daily life. What is the truth about truth? Googlers ask. Is there such a thing as "absolute truth"? If so, is absolute truth the same as abstract truth? Is truth primarily something known to the intellect, or is truth something known to the soul? Is truth an intellectual assertion or a soul moment, or both? Why was one of Jesus's signature phrases "I tell you the truth"? Are there different kinds of truth? And what does it mean to live "untruthful" lives?

The heartbreak of broadened brokenness makes Googlers yearn for a living relationship with Christ. But, Gutenbergs counter, Googler Culture is so narcissistic. And it takes a cavalier attitude toward absolute truth, the authority of Scripture, and the creeds of Christianity. Perhaps. Perhaps not. But in my experience Googlers are not cavalier about the things that matter most. They are interested in the core, the heart, the elemental matters of life and faith. That is how so many of them end up finding the Word, the Person who is relationship and meaning.

Only Jesus can satisfy the persistent longing at the heart of us all. There will be time later on for formulations and words that are creedal and descriptive, enlightening and reformational. Even Arminian and Reformed, Anabaptist and Anglican, Pentecostal and dispensational.

I have no axe to grind against Gutenbergs. I was born one, was bred as one, and spent much of my adult life eating bread from its table. In fact, I was a Gutenberg among Gutenbergs. In the early days of my coming up through the ranks, I held the jackets and clerical collars of particularly zealous Gutenbergs as they threw brickbats at the digitized, globalized culture on the horizon.

That was then. I have repented publicly and privately. Now we live in a TGIF world. Gutenberg Culture is the fringe culture, and the Gutenberg church has moved far from the heart of life, closer to edges of the ledge. Googlers are culture makers, and I am convinced they hold the secret to ministry and mission. So if you're ready to throw a brickbat, don't hand me your jacket. I'll be standing over there, alongside the ones you'll hit, learning how Googlers create community and live their love for Jesus.

### Interactives

1. What is your text-to-voice call ratio? Describe the differences and why you prefer the one you do.
2. Why do you think 87 percent of African Americans and Hispanics own a cell phone, compared to 80 percent of whites? Why are Hispanic and African American adults more likely than whites to be wireless-only?
3. T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" is available from Touch Press in an interactive iPad edition.<sup>9</sup> What poems or stories would you like to see in this interactive form? How might the church use this form of interactivity to tell its story?
4. Is the digital book taking us back to scrolling? Google books scroll, but Kindle, iPad, and Nook seem uncertain. Are you a page turner or a scroller?
5. Marianne Sawicki defined doctrinal theology in this way: "the selection and abstraction of certain elements from Christian Scripture, the refinement of those elements by philosophical means into declarative statements, and the arrangement of those statements into a systematic presentation that is asserted to be true in itself and also representative of its scriptural source."<sup>10</sup> How interested in doctrinal theology should your church be? How do you respond to Sawicki's definition?