Is the Internet Evil?

Many of us in our church have grown up listening to subliminal messaging against the internet. We have been, and in some cases are still to this day, subject to dire warnings to stay off social media, stay off websites that disseminate information, and to not trust anything we read on the internet. Therefore, the question must be asked, is the internet evil?

No, the internet is not evil, the internet is a communication tool. Any tool can be used for positive (productive) purposes, or negative (destructive) purposes. For example, a hammer helps us build a house, but it also helps us tear the house down.

Fundamentally, the Internet is nothing more than a worldwide network of connected computers. This innovation allows vast quantities of instantaneous digital information dissemination, which dramatically lowers the cost of publishing and distributing knowledge.

Mankind invents tools to make their lives easier, complete tasks faster, and to increase productivity. Ultimately, any tool is a manifestation of our desire to do more work in less time. Innovation is an incontrovertibly innate part of humanity that always has been, and always will be. Trying to arrest the forward march of progress is like trying to stop the Earth's revolution around our Sun.

Innovations also tremendously benefit God's people. Today, we have more understanding of God's creation than at any other time in history. Today, thousands of people can drive far and wide to conventions in a few hours, whereas 125 years ago at the dawn of our modern church history, it would have taken days of travel. Today we have medicine that helps people live longer and thrive with a quality of life far beyond previous generations. Today we have smartphones and video conferencing that enable people to communicate clear across the globe. Today, we have numerous communication capabilities that foster outreach, networking, and sharing the Gospel unlike any other epoch of human history.

The Internet is a tool of our epochal technological revolution, the Digital Age. Fire, the Wheel, Electricity, the Printing Press, the Industrial Revolution (automation of all menial labour), and now the Internet (digitization of all knowledge) are all examples of technological revolutions. Winston Churchill said, *"those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it."* To understand the civilizational leap of technological progress that the internet represents, we need to study history to see what happened in the past when similar tools were invented. For our purposes we will look at the Printing Press.

The printing press was invented around 1450AD; it revolutionized society by standardizing language, increasing literacy, and increasing the speed and spread of knowledge and ideas. All of which then had the snowball effect leading to further discoveries and expansion in all aspects of civilization. The size of the change is important, it didn't just increase these things by 10%, it was an order of magnitude exponential step change (10 to the power of $10 = 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10 = 10,000,000,000$ %).

Whenever technological innovation creates massive amounts of change in a relatively short period of time, society has trouble adjusting to the speed of change. Therefore, many disruptions and revolutions ensue. The choice to view this inevitable change as a revolution or rebellion has always been a matter of perspective, often defined by opposite sides of the status quo power structure. The printing press revolution ended the Dark Ages (a period of civilizational decline) and ushered in the Renaissance/Enlightenment (a period of civilizational progress; a rise in living standards, and life expectancy).

Before this printing technology was invented, the Catholic Church had a monopoly on access to the scripture and its interpretation for over 1200 years. The peasants did not have access to a Bible (nor could most of them read if they did have access), therefore the vast majority of the population lived in fear of eternal damnation based on what their priest told them. Much like the Levitical Priesthood that Jesus came to abolish, the Roman Catholic priests also held a monopoly on the souls of mankind.

By 1500AD, thanks to the printing press, the Protestant Reformation was in full bloom. Protestants (etymological definition: *'one who makes or enters a Protest'*) used the printing press to proliferate revolutionary theological material at a popular level. Conversely, the Catholic Church produced large quantities of anti-Reformation publications.

The printing press allowed widespread communication of information that promoted traditional status quo systems. Simultaneously it also allowed widespread communication that resulted in reassessment and challenges to status quo traditions, ideas, doctrine; even the very idea of Truth itself. A tool can be used for either construction or destruction, and whether that is viewed as positive re-construction or negative de-construction depends on how entrenched we are within our cultural, religious, and ideological comfort zones.

Again, in the 18th century, when newspapers as a communication medium became more common, those at the top of the power hierarchy discouraged people getting their news from the printed page, arguing that it socially isolated readers and detracted from the spiritually uplifting group practice of getting news from the pulpit.

Fast forward to 2023. The world is changing faster that ever before. The Internet has instigated the Digital Revolution, the next technological exponential step change for humanity. All aspects of our society are struggling to adjust, adapt, and survive this disruption, no institution is exempt. Governments, Schools, Monetary/Economic systems, and yes, The Church. Civilization has crossed the event horizon from an analog past, boldly hurtling towards our inevitable digital future.

Welcome to the Digital Age! Ne'er shall we look back, pining for the simplicity of an irretrievable past, lest a pillar of salt is all that remains of our beloved church.

God allowed the Protestant Reformation to take place, and he also allowed the printing press to act as a primary revolutionary tool. After a millennium of spiritual suffocation by the Catholic Church, our modern era church sprang from the seeds of the Spirit of the Reformation and

Restoration movements. These movements fought to re-establish the Truth of Jesus here on earth, they fought for the rights of individuals to live out the liberty of God's Grace.

I would therefore respectfully suggest that we too, in 2023, deep in the throes of another exponential revolutionary technological change called the Internet, will also benefit more than we are harmed if we successfully learn how to navigate this change.

Jesus wasn't afraid of change. The religious leaders of his time were deeply entrenched in generations of tradition, ritual, and outward form. Jesus spoke out against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees; He illuminated the egregious harm their legalism imposed upon others, and they hated him for it. He was vilified as an irreverent radical, as a rebel who was trying to destroy God's chosen priesthood. However, we know he wasn't trying to destroy anything except the base qualities of our human nature; to transform humanity from slavery to the old law, so that each one could be reborn as the fulfillment of God's law of Love.

Today, the internet has enabled voices of the poor and needy to be heard that never had a voice before. Some of these voices should have been heard long ago, but they could only reach uncaring ears: the established power structure that stifled transparency through siloed, antiquated, analog communication mediums. Now the internet has enabled these voices to reach those with ears that will hear, and hearts that will respond.

Many will argue that the internet also causes division, but it's people's choices that cause division. With the advent of the printing press, people had the choice to be liberated by previously inaccessible knowledge, or they could continue to choose willful ignorance. 575 years later, humanity faces the exact same choice with the internet.

God is in control, and He has allowed and enabled the technological tools that have made this possible. To ignore these voices that can now be heard by all is like the priest and the Levite on the Jericho Road. Should these cries be ignored because they originate from a keyboard or a phone instead of a ditch? No! Regardless of how these cries are voiced, they test the condition of our hearts. To turn a deaf ear, regardless of the technology, is simply callous, a condition of heart we must fearfully avoid.

Friends, I cannot in good conscience avoid walking where those suffering have found their voice, as it would be akin to walking on the other side of the ditch to avoid seeing the half-dead man who needs help. Help I feel woefully inadequate to dispense, but I will do my part with whatever diverse gifts God has given me. I will not pretend the problem does not exist, I will trust in God, trust in the conviction he as given me that love for our brethren requires action, not apathy.

May the anointing oil of the Holy Spirit, the Love of Jesus, and the Grace of God our Divine Sovereign, applied in no small measure, help initiate the long overdue healing process our church requires. Let us therefore embrace the use the Internet as a tool of positive re-construction towards a better future for our children, a better future for our church, and a better future for our souls.

Sincerely, Shaun Ausenhus

*Sources include: the internet, peer review by friends I met on the internet, critical thinking skills, and a lifetime of reading books (including, but not limited to, the Bible) *