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From Print to “Image Media”: Neil Postman’s *The Disappearance of Childhood*

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Once, while driving, I listened to an educator who was being interviewed on radio. He praised his particular brand of education in which students have the same rights as teachers. He explained that students must have a determining voice in the creation of the curriculum and the subjects which are taught. “It is, after all,” he concluded, “the student’s education of which we are speaking.” He continued: “We know that education, as it has traditionally been practiced, does not work.”

He pointed out that despite all efforts by teachers and parents, education has gone into a decline. The rates of “functional illiteracy” have increased, despite many efforts to remedy the situation. It appears that the educational system cannot accomplish the ends for which it was designed: to teach the young the basic skills of reading, writing, and of presenting their thoughts in a logical manner.

The solution which the educator suggested is, in Neil Postman’s words, “claiming that the disease is the cure”.¹ Or, as he then goes on to say “Expressed more neutrally, what this sort of analysis represents [he refers to the Child’s Rights Movement] is the attempt to provide a rationalisation for what appears to be an irreversible cultural tendency.”²

The Disappearance of Childhood

“The irreversible cultural tendency” is the disappearance of Childhood. It is the result of a shift from the “print media” to the “electronic media”, which I will call “image media”.

According to Postman, this shift has a levelling effect: it turns children into small adults, and adults into big children:

that is to say, the difference between children and adults is getting progressively smaller.

This tendency was already in evidence more than 20 years ago, when I studied theology. The buzz-word then had it that the pastor was an “enabler”. The implication of this is that pastors and parishioners are equal, that students and professors are equal, and that since all are equal, their understanding and knowledge of theology must also be equal.

Parallel to this development went another levelling: child rearing experts told us that a parent must avoid giving directions to his or her children so that a child will be able to learn how to make decisions. The assumption is that the child knows as well as the parent what is good for him or her.

This development disturbed me at times, but I never realized what was taking place, namely, that the equality of all was assumed as well as the absence of any knowledge gap. All people are seen as equal, because they all know, or are able to know, the same things.

Elaborations of Neil Postman’s Hypothesis

Reading Neil Postman’s book was an exciting enterprise for me, because it opened vistas of understanding and gave insights to me, which I had previously never considered.

I think that *The Disappearance of Childhood* deserves serious consideration. But I must caution that the implications which I find in it for church and society may not have been intended by Postman. But, as I see it, precisely these implications make his book valuable, and almost required reading for Christian ministers and educators. For, while one might disagree with Postman’s view of childhood as the inevitable development which occurred when the print media came into being, and now is disappearing precisely because the print media have been replaced by the image media, his observations on both the print media and the image media seem to be of higher importance than any dispute about the origin or reason for the disappearance of childhood.

There is an important point here which we Lutherans overlook at our peril. It was expressed to me in this way by a pastor: “It is strange that Lutherans have such problems in coping with the mass media in view of the fact that the Reformation was a media event.” While this observation is correct,

I hasten to amend it: The Reformation was a “print media event”, and therein lies the difference. For it just could be that it was the print media which led to the Lutheran theology as we know it. Postman says:

The form of the printed book created a new way of organizing content, and in so doing, it promoted a new way of organizing thought. The unyielding linearity of the printed book—the sequential nature of its sentence-by-sentence presentation, its paragraphing, its alphabetized indices, its standardized spelling and grammar—led to the habits of thinking that James Joyce mockingly called ABCED-mindedness, meaning a structure of consciousness that closely parallels the structure of typography.³

Since only people who were able to read and write could benefit from the print culture, learning to read and write became very important. Quickly people were separated into those who could and those who could not read or write. Because it was necessary and took time to learn these skills, childhood was invented, and children “were separated because it became essential in their culture that they learn how to read and write, and how to be the sort of people a print media culture required”.⁴

When we recall Luther’s admonition to cities and their councils, then we see that Postman is correct when he says “The Lutherans wanted people who could read both, vernacular Bibles and grievances against the Church”;⁵ for Luther indeed wanted children to learn how to read so that they would be able to read the Bible.

Since learning to read and write takes a lengthy period of time, the separation of children and adults was undertaken. Since books can easily be controlled, it was easy to control information, and so a knowledge gap came into being. To think that the child is equal to a parent, a pupil equal to a teacher, a student equal to a professor, a layperson equal to a professional, is an absurdity in the print culture.

Postman shows how the situation began to change when the electronic media came into existence and information could no longer be controlled. According to Postman this began with the invention of the telegraph: “... the telegraph began the process of making information uncontrollable.”⁶ From then on the structure of communication changed rapidly, until we arrived at TV, which not only gives information, but

“changed the form of information itself—from discursive to non-discursive, from propositional to presentational, from rationalistic to emotive”.⁷

This last point needs some further elaboration. Postman explains,

Language is an abstraction about experience, whereas pictures are a concrete representation of experience....Words and pictures are different universes of discourse, for a word is always and foremost an idea....Pictures do not show concepts; they show things... a picture is irrefutable. It does not put forward a proposition, it implies no opposite or negation of itself, there are no rules of evidence or logic to which it must conform....Pictures require of the observer an aesthetic response, they call upon our emotions, not our reason....Television is first and foremost a visual medium.⁸

In sum, “it is the picture that dominates the viewer’s consciousness and carries its critical meaning.”⁹

When the picture became the medium of information, and the approach to information became non-analytical, childhood, i.e. the knowledge gap, began to disappear together with a sense of history. When the picture is the medium of information, then past, present, and future melt into one, and people begin to respond emotionally and not logically. The mode of sequential, rational and logical thought is replaced by emotional responses. Logic and reason are no longer the foundations of an argument because the visual image is neither logical nor reasonable; it elicits neither a rational nor a logical response, but demands an emotional reaction.

The main-line Protestant churches are frequently criticized for stressing the intellect and neglecting the emotions of its adherents. If Postman’s insight is correct, then the Protestant churches grew together with the print culture and its rational-sequential-logical-intellectual way, and would therefore seem to be incapable of communicating in images to which people can respond emotionally.

Today’s preaching in the main-line Protestant churches has sometimes been compared to a “pail of water experience”. When one puts a hand into a pail of water, a certain amount of water is displaced, and the water-level rises; but as soon as the hand is withdrawn, the water returns to its former position. When one preaches, there is a momentary response, but shortly thereafter, everything returns to “normal”. This is not

caused by the inability of modern preachers to communicate effectively, nor by the fact that they may have nothing important to say, nor by the fact that our theology is no longer relevant, but could very well be due to the logical, reasonable, intellectual and conceptual approach to preaching practiced in these churches.

There exists the real possibility that in the climate of the image media Lutheran theology can no longer be understood. Very real efforts would have to be made to translate our theology into the language of the image media.

Since no one needs to attend school in order to receive the information which TV provides, there is no longer a perceived knowledge gap. All there is to know can be seen and heard. And everyone who can see and hear can also instantly know and experience, albeit vicariously, what everyone else knows and experiences. The differences between people tend to disappear; the student becomes equal to the teacher and the child equal to the parent.

Questions arising from Postman

Questions which ask whether these developments are good or bad, helpful or troublesome, regressive or progressive, whether they should be advanced or retarded, are not helpful. Asking and attempting to answer them is equal to turning off the TV in disgust after we have seen the show.

Nor may we legitimately ask how this development might have been prevented; it could not have been prevented, because history is generally not foreseeable. It is also foolish to ask whether TV can be tamed, for it functions by its own rules, and these very rules do not allow us to domesticate it.

There is only one legitimate question to be asked: What implications do the arrival and acceptance of the image-culture have for the future of the Christian church, our faith, our proclamation, the way in which we communicate the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith, the way we teach our children, and what can and what cannot be expected of them in learning the basic tenets of the Christian faith; and perhaps most crucially: How does all this influence our worship? For if under the influence of the image culture the form of our worship must change, then how will this change its substance, i.e. our proclamation?

I am not sure that anyone can answer the above questions at this time. Therefore, I will now discuss two questions which I pose myself.

Is the equalisation of adult-child, teacher-student, professional-layperson, something which can occur without changing the substance of the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith?

At the end of the 20th century, the Lutheran church worldwide finds itself in an unaccustomed position: we have no outstanding theologians. We took pride for centuries in the fact that Lutheran theology was on the very highest level, leading in almost every field of theological study. Lutheran people have been in the forefront of many intellectual endeavors. Now it seems we cannot hold on to this prestigious position.

The reason may well be that Lutheran theology is grounded in the logical, sequential and rationally verifiable methods of the print culture. For though Luther used to call reason a "whore", he nevertheless stated that he was willing to be persuaded by either scripture or reason, if someone was able to do so.

Now that we have left the print culture behind, and have entered into the era of the image culture in which things happen before our eyes right now, and we respond emotionally rather than logically, it is perhaps no longer possible to communicate Lutheran theology effectively or even to understand it properly.

The image culture has provided its own pressures. One of them is that everything must be immediately understandable. Anything which is not immediately understood, and which requires further thought and investigation, denies the observer the immediate gratification to which one has become accustomed. That which is not understood at once is perceived as either having been badly presented, or as a problem, a question, or something which is not of sufficient weight to be pursued further.

There is therefore the tendency to forget unresolved questions and problems. This too is closely connected to the image media: new images burst on the screen every 8 to 12 seconds, and they are forgotten as soon as they disappear. Whatever cannot be solved at once, whatever cannot be understood at

first glance, is laid aside and forgotten and usually never taken up again.

This means that people whose lives are lived in the image culture have neither the time, nor the inclination, nor the will, nor the rational and intellectual tools to solve problems. One simply concludes that raising a problem is in itself its solution. Once a problem disappears from the screen, it no longer exists.

This is the way in which the image media deals with problems: they are raised, considered, discussed, and then put aside. The viewer is led to the conclusion that the moment the problem disappears from the screen it has also disappeared in reality. As long as starving Africans do not appear on the screen in my living room, they do not exist.

Since Lutheran theology appears to rest on premises which are accessible only through hearing or reading Scripture and the Word of God, and is developed by making logical and reasonable deductions from such reading and hearing, it is unlikely that it will find wide acceptance in an era of images. It could, however, remain the preserve of an intellectual elite.

Written statements are subject to revision. In every thought there is the possibility of error. Therefore, the teacher is required to correct the student, an adult to help a child, a professional to point out to the non-professional where his or her thinking went wrong. The teacher must know better than the student, the adult is assumed to know the world better than the child, and the professional must know more about his or her field of expertise than the non-professional.

While it may be humane, and perhaps even be Christian, to minimize differences between people, it seems to me that it is highly unlikely that Lutheran theology will escape the process of equalisation without being substantially changed.

Is the change from print culture to image culture something which will influence the way we worship? And if the forms change, how will this affect the substance?

The most successful "evangelical" churches call their worship area "auditorium". The physical arrangements are such that people can observe a stage on which colorfully attired choirs and musicians give performances. Music plays a large part in the service. But the participation of the congregation is on a very limited scale; and most surprising of all, Scripture

readings are rare and very short. The "audience" is seated in such a way that a panning camera will show a full house even if only 25 percent of the building is filled. The whole service is set up for the images which it creates on the screen.

This also demands its own form of proclamation: the image is more important than the substance. What is said matters less than how it is said and what kind of impression the speaker makes. The garb of the preacher is that of a successful and flamboyant business person. In order to be judged successful, one must also appear successful.

This inevitably leads to a theology of glory, and distorts the traditional evangelical Lutheran theology. Healings, successful conversions, and wonderful and terrible predictions hold the center stage. This is not due to a deliberate attempt of the preachers to mislead or to distort; it is forced upon them by the medium, which must be accommodated.

While media proclamation is started in all sincerity and with the best intentions, the medium imposes its own standards, and changes the proclamation from a carefully reasoned approach to the presentation of quick fixes and simple solutions. Since real life does not know quick fixes, and since simple solutions rarely work in practice, Christian use of the media exposes itself shortly as fraudulent. The end result is that all Christian proclamation is seen as fraudulent.

Yet the change from print culture to image culture has already influenced the way we worship. Hand in hand, and apparently unconnected, with the proliferation of TV, went the "liturgical renewal", the rediscovery of the sacrament of the altar as a weekly celebration, the rediscovery or invention of vestments, the use of banners, processions and more, tied together with a general down-grading of the sermon and the discovery of "narrative preaching".

Here too, as far as I can see, the substance takes second place behind the form. The attention of the observer (note how difficult it is to say "worshipper") is diverted, away from the spoken and proclaimed word to the symbols and images of worship.

If Postman is right, and we are returning to a society in which childhood is no longer relevant, then it might be profitable for the church to learn from medieval society in which

childhood did not exist, how to communicate the gospel in such a situation.

Concluding Statement

According to the way of thinking and the *modus operandi* of the media culture, the raising of a problem, putting it before people and discussing it, is thought to be the solution. This type of problem-solving is widely practiced, but does not solve anything. Problems go on existing, things around us will change, and we will wonder how, why and when, but we will have no influence over the rate or direction of change.

With this paper I would like to generate some thought, discussion and perhaps even some action regarding this matter. It is not important whether people agree or disagree with me, just as long as they will look seriously at the implications which the change from print to image culture holds for us, our church and our theology.

Notes

- 1 Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc, 1982) 141.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid. 30.
- 4 Ibid. 38.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid. 71.
- 7 Ibid. 73.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid. 77.