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2007/1 Publishing On The Internet

by B. S. Poh

Technology has developed way ahead of man's ability to make full use of it. The advent of the Internet has made it possible to post news, articles, graphics, and motion pictures of all kinds on websites. The quality and helpfulness of material obtainable on the Internet vary greatly.

To put the Internet to good use in the dissemination of information, two factors are involved. One is to have the *know-how*, i.e. the ability to handle websites. The other is to have the *know-what*, i.e. the substance to disseminate. Too many of those who have ability to handle websites do not have substance of value to disseminate. Too many of those who have something useful to offer do not have the ability to handle websites. The few who have both the substance and the ability to handle websites are able to straightaway upload onto the Internet whatever they have to offer. However, the maintenance of the websites soon eats into time for producing original substance. To continue being productive and fresh, the manual task of maintaining the websites would have to be delegated to others. We live in a specialised and differentiated world. We need one another.

The dissemination of Bible truths on the Internet requires that Christians work in co-operation, in the setting of a local church. More can be accomplished, at the same time that we have the benefits of fellowship, mutual care, and opportunities of training and development. This is where the local church comes into its own, compared to other organisations and to individuals working by themselves. We believe that the local church is central and unique in the purposes of God. A church can go astray, as has happened so often, when truth is obscured and error tolerated and propagated. Local churches, in their various relations and interactions with one another, provide their own check-and-balance to some extent. The benefits of church-based ministries are many. We single out some significant benefits of Internet publishing as a ministry of the church.

Firstly, the minister of the gospel would possess an additional channel of having the truth heard or read by others. The minister is the ordained servant of God, whose training and biblical qualifications equip him to be the teacher of God's word. We realise that not all preachers are writers. We also realise that not all preachers are equally gifted, such that the preached messages are good enough for a wider audience. We all know too well that there are ministers who, instead of preaching, engage in delivering messages like lectures. We also know that inexperienced or poorly trained preachers leave much to be desired in their exegesis of Bible passages and in the crafting of their messages. The messages of such men would be better left to the smaller audience of their respective churches. Having made these qualifications, it remains generally true that one who can preach the word of God to his congregation acceptably should be able to have his message heard by a larger audience. There is such a dearth of the preaching of God's word. A preacher who is not gifted in writing may still have his messages heard.

Secondly, we would be alleviating the problem of untrained and unqualified people addressing others with authority on points of doctrine and on the Christian life. We would not forbid an unordained man to preach the word. In fact, we would encourage our church members to grow spiritually so that they can be teachers of the word (1 Cor. 3:1-2; Heb. 5:12-14). We would also encourage our church members to be actively engaged in witnessing to non-believers (Matt. 28:18-20). All these are carried out under the general oversight of the church. A good church would involve all the members in services of some kind. The danger arises when one who is not a teacher of the word

in church takes upon himself the task of teaching others on the Internet. The readers at large would not have the advantage of knowing the credentials of the writer, or of checking him out if the credentials are openly paraded, which is seldom done. We have no right to stop anyone from publishing anything on the Internet. However, it is easier to check on a church which makes known its statement of faith and location address, than on an individual. We are warned in the Scripture, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgement" (James 3:1). We are reminded of Augustine of Hippo who in his later years published a tome to retract much of his earlier writings. A dose of humility would do many a self-appointed teacher on the Internet much good.

Thirdly, we would be able to reach people groups who are deprived of the normal channels of hearing the gospel. The normal way of witnessing is by the Christian bringing the gospel by word of mouth to the hearers (Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 10:14-17). In this way, soul meets with soul. The word of God is communicated immediately, instead of mediately. The response of the hearers is registered real-time, and personally by the preacher, who can then adjust the content and delivery accordingly and effectually. The Holy Spirit honours the personality and gifts of the preacher in the conveyance of truth.

Much as it is desirable to witness in person, the reality is that there are people groups who cannot be reached in this manner by virtue of distance, political hindrances, and religious restrictions. Just as radio and television programmes are reaching such people groups, the Internet messages are reaching them as well. We know that, ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who brings conviction, by the word of God, to the hearer or reader. But God does not bypass the use of means - in this case, it is the published gospel on the Internet. Readers and hearers would want to know who they are learning from. Again, the church will have the advantage over other organisations and individuals. "But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor 4:2).

Lastly, there are situations where normal publishing is hampered by local laws. Internet publishing is able to circumvent such hindrances. We do not believe that the printed page will be replaced by electronic books. We do not believe Christians should forego church attendance in favour of listening to, or reading, messages on the Internet. We believe in the primacy of preaching (Rom. 10:17). A case can be made for defining preaching as the direct proclamation of God's word before a live audience. The broadcasting of preaching is only broadcast, not preaching. It serves a purpose, as we are acknowledging in this article, but it should not replace preaching. Furthermore, listening to preaching has the additional dimension of the Lord's special presence (Matt. 18:20; 28:20). All these said, we note that electronic publishing is a good handmaid to normal publishing and broadcasted sermons. Material on the Internet may still be downloaded anywhere in the world and produced as books and magazines, or on compact discs.

Experienced ministers should make more use of the Internet to disseminate the truth. Churches should rally around their pastors to use this medium for outreach purposes. Christians should be bold and responsible in publishing electronically. We should all be thankful for the advent of the Internet, while treading cautiously, for everything that is good is liable to be abused.

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