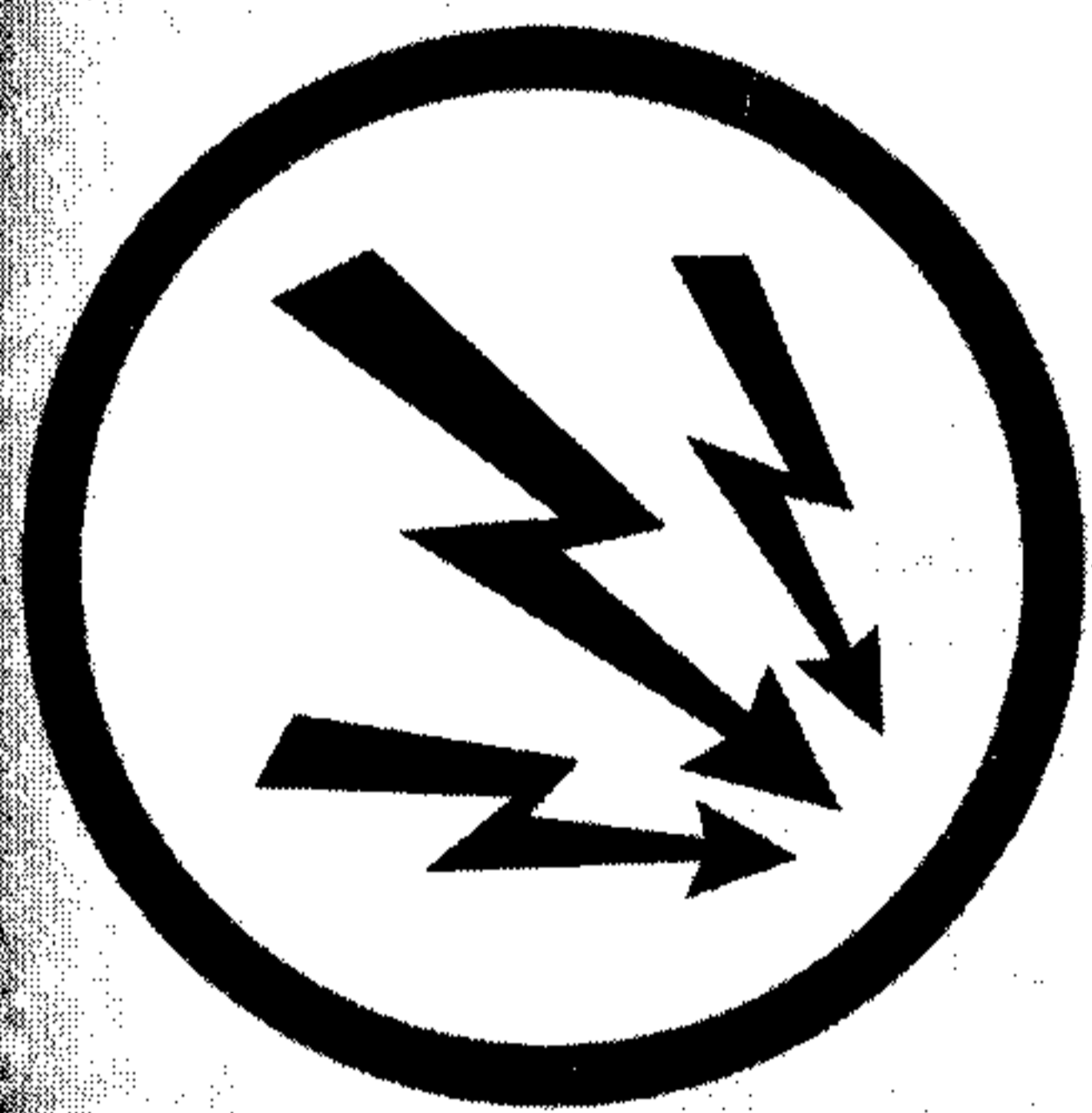


THE HIDDEN POWER OF ELECTRONIC CULTURE



HOW MEDIA SHAPES FAITH,
THE GOSPEL, AND CHURCH



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The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church

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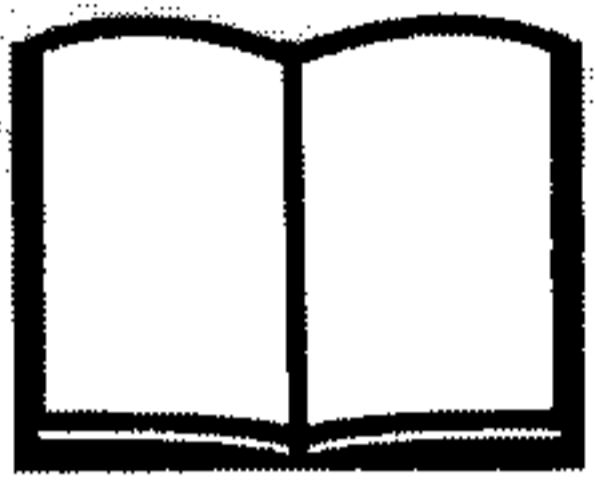
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PRINTING: THE ARCHITECT OF THE MODERN CHURCH

CHAPTER THREE

APPLYING MCLUHAN'S MESSAGE...ER, MEDIUM

Perhaps we can best understand the ways in which the medium and the message are intertwined by examining the effects of a technology so familiar it is rarely considered a technology. It is the one you are consuming right now: the printed word. But this study of print is more than an exercise. I contend the medium of print shaped the modern church in ways we are only beginning to recognize in the wake of postmodernism. Only when we study these changes can we begin to perceive the impact of the other forms of media on our understanding of community, leadership, and worship.

"THE PRINTED BOOK ADDED MUCH TO THE NEW CULT OF INDIVIDUALISM. THE PRIVATE, FIXED POINT OF VIEW BECAME POSSIBLE AND LITERACY CONFERRED THE POWER OF DETACHMENT, NONINVOLVEMENT."¹

—MARSHALL MCLUHAN

DYSLEXIA AND DECEPTION

The medium of the printed word is one I have learned not to take for granted. When I was in the second grade, we were often sub-



jected to timed, in-class reading tests. I was convinced those tests were from Satan. They required me to muster every last brain cell to decipher the words and sentences on the page. After straining through the first couple of sentences, I would inevitably notice that the two students sitting to my right and left had already gone on to the next page while I was still stuck on the first paragraph. A panic would set in, and I found myself turning the page whenever they did so I wouldn't look dumb or slow. It seemed like a good plan at the time. Of course we were often quizzed on the material we had just read (or in my case, not read), and needless to say I did not score well. Naturally, it didn't take long for my teachers and parents to catch on.

When it became clear my poor performance was the rule and not the exception, my parents had me tested for learning disabilities. I was diagnosed with dyslexia—an amorphous condition often caricatured as reading words backward. My dyslexia was a bit more subtle; every time I looked at the printed page, I felt like I had just walked out of a dark movie theater into the bright light of day. It took time for my eyes to adjust and cobble together the letters on the page so I could make sense of them. My biggest problem was leaving out entire words like *not* or *but*, words crucial for comprehension. I would also unknowingly change words that looked similar—*what* might become *when*. By the end of a paragraph I could not make head nor tail of what I had read and would have to go back to the beginning. During my senior year of high school I was tested again and learned I had the reading comprehension of an eighth grader. Since then things have gotten better, but the general struggle remains.

My difficulties with reading and writing didn't just affect my schoolwork. Dyslexia truly makes my brain function differently from the brains of others. In those early diagnostic tests I scored very low on both visual perception and the ability to organize information or objects. That meant that in addition to my reading difficulties, my desk at school was a hopeless mess, a black hole for most of my homework assignments. In contrast, those without difficulty reading had no trouble with visual perception and could organize information and objects with ease. Whether they chose to be organized was a different matter—the point is they had a competence I did not.

At the same time, compared to normal readers, I scored extremely high in the area of short-term memory. This phenomenon is not uncommon among children with dyslexia or other reading

problems. The explanation is quite simple: like a blind person who develops acute hearing for survival, my brain compensated for my visual deficits by enhancing memory, specifically auditory memory. Because I could barely access information through the visual act of reading, I depended upon retaining what the teacher said for my learning. Incidentally, as I have become more fluent in the world of literacy, my organizational skills have improved, and my short-term memory has diminished.

My personal experience illustrates a major premise of this chapter: the technology of writing, which relies so heavily on the visual sense, shapes the way we think, regardless of what is written. That fact that I didn't read or write much made me a very different thinker, a different person. What was true for me on an individual level is true on a cultural level as well. The broad introduction of literacy into an entire culture completely alters the way that culture thinks. Writing has the power to restructure the worldview of an entire society. As we shall see, it clearly had that effect on the church.

Of all the media inventions in history, few can rival the explosive and dramatic effects of the written word. This is important to understand, because it shows us that "we become what we behold."² That is to say, our thinking patterns begin to mirror the specific form of media we use to communicate.

While we in the West think very little about the power of the written word, those who have lived or worked in purely oral cultures know that the written word holds a magical and mysterious quality for those who have never experienced it before. Consider the experience of a West African tribal prince named Modupe who recounts in his autobiography his first encounter with the mysterious medium of writing:

The one crowded space in Father Perry's house was his bookshelves. I gradually came to understand that the marks on the pages were trapped words. Anyone could learn to decipher the symbols and turn the trapped words loose again into speech. The ink of the print trapped the thoughts; they could no more get away than a doomboo could get out of a pit. When the full realization of what this meant flooded over me, I experienced the same thrill and amazement as when I had my first glimpse of the bright lights of Konakry [sic]. I shivered with the intensity of my desire to learn to do this wondrous thing myself.³



While some of the cultural metaphors are lost on me (I have no idea what a *doomboo* is or where Konakry might be), the point he makes is clear. In fact, I could replace the reference to writing in the paragraph above with a reference to the Internet, and it would reflect well my own enthusiasm when I first encountered this amazing technology.

Writing is not often thought of as a technology. We certainly don't consider it in the same league as the Internet or cell phones. Yet writing is a technology, because it depends upon the use of special tools such as a pen and paper or brushes and animal skins. But more than this, it requires the human invention of a symbol system, one that can take years to learn how to decode (read) and encode (write).⁴

A QUANTUM LEAP: THE PHONETIC ALPHABET

The printing press had been in existence in China for nearly 800 years prior to its European debut in the 1400s, and yet it had none of the same liberating intellectual effects it had in the West.⁵ While the Chinese used pictorial writing, the West developed a phonetic alphabet. This may seem like an obscure distinction, but it has far-reaching implications. It is the basis for the hemispheric difference between Eastern and Western worldviews. Understanding this will give us insight into why the postmodern worldview came about in the West and one reason postmodernity shares so much in common with Eastern modes of thinking.

Ideographic writing (e.g., Chinese characters) is distinct from phonetic writing (e.g., the English alphabet) in that it symbolizes spoken language in a completely unique way. Ideographic writing systems, which existed thousands of years prior to phonetic alphabets, are pictorial in nature. A single symbol or character represents an entire word or concept and often bears a resemblance to the thing it describes. For example, the Chinese character for *man* looks like a stylized stick figure of a man (see Figure 2).

PHONETIC WRITING	IDEOGRAPHIC WRITING
man	夫

FIGURE 2

Because each symbol represents an entire word or idea, a dizzying number of characters are required for communication. In fact, that number could be infinite or at least equal to the number of words in the language. The Chinese dictionary has over 80,000 characters and is still growing.⁶ The idea of using a printing press for mass communication in China made about as much sense as creating a computer keyboard with 80,000 keys.

The phonetic alphabet, comprised of just over two dozen characters (in the case of English), changed everything. Instead of inventing symbols that corresponded with specific words or ideas, the people who formed phonetic alphabets made meaningless characters that corresponded to meaningless “phonemes” or vocal sounds.⁷ For example, the symbol “t” corresponds to the meaningless sound “teh.” These symbols are then assembled sequentially to re-create the sound of the spoken word. In other words, the phonetic alphabet is a symbol system that is totally abstracted from reality. Unlike Chinese, the English word *man* looks nothing like a man; it is just a collection of abstract, meaningless squiggly shapes used to create meaning.

Moreover, a phonetic alphabet demands letters be organized in a specific linear sequence in order for them to be meaningful. The collection of symbols a, m, and n doesn’t mean anything until it is arranged as m-a-n. By contrast, a single Chinese symbol can stand alone and carry full meaning. While a phonetic alphabet is linear, sequential, and abstract, ideographic writing is nonlinear, holistic, and intuitive.

These two media have very different forms that contribute to the fundamental differences between Eastern and Western approaches to philosophy. Ever since the Greeks perfected the phonetic alphabet, Western philosophy has been centered on linear, fragmented, and sequential forms of logic called syllogisms that perfectly mirror the form of our writing system. In contrast the nonlinear, holistic nature of Eastern philosophy can be summarized by a single symbol, the *yin-yang*, which mirrors ideographic writing.

Figure 3 on the following page summarizes this difference to show us that we become what we behold.




	WESTERN THINKING BASED ON THE SYLLOGISM	EASTERN THINKING BASED ON THE YIN-YANG
WRITING SYSTEM	m-a-n ↓	夫 ↓
PATTERN OF THINKING	All philosophers are men; all men are mortal; therefore, all philosophers are mortal. Notice that the linear, sequential order of logic mirrors the pattern of the Western alphabet.	 Notice that the holistic, intuitive nature of the yin-yang mirrors the ideographic writing of the East.

FIGURE 3

It may appear that we have ventured a long way from the church in this exploration, but understanding the distinction matters for us today. In our current culture we are increasingly communicating with images and icons. We need to understand what happens to Western culture when we begin to communicate using images and logos rather than phonetic words, as in the case of Nike.

One consequence is that people in Western culture start thinking more like those in the East. The holistic, intuitive, and experiential emphases of postmodernity (a Western phenomenon) are Eastern in character. So it is worth our while to dig into the ways in which both cultural perspectives have been formed—and re-formed—through media. We will explore the implications of this re-formation for the church more fully in Chapter Four.

PRINTING: IGNITING THE ALPHABET

The formation of the phonetic alphabet was an important element in shaping Western thought, but its true impact became apparent only after it was channeled through the medium of print. Printing amplified the effects of the alphabet with exponential force and completely restructured the culture—and therefore the church—in the process.

The Greeks created their version of the phonetic alphabet around 700 B.C. and had mastered it by 400 B.C.⁸ Like a slow gas leak lasting 1,000 years, the alphabet gradually infiltrated Western culture. However, this leak was all but turned off during the fourth century when papyrus supplies dried up, literacy rates plummeted, and Europe returned to a dominantly oral culture. In turn, the medieval Catholic Church began reflecting the characteristics of oral culture, leading to their increasingly mystical and sacramental theology. Literacy was reintroduced to the West in the 12th century when Chinese traders brought paper to Europe.

In the 15th century, Johannes Gutenberg found an innovative use for a wine press, and the modern age of the printing press was born. With this simple invention, Gutenberg unknowingly set off an explosion of such overwhelming power that we continue to feel its reverberations today. Printing made the alphabet perfectly uniform and infinitely repeatable. This mass production placed literacy into the hands of everyone, subsequently launching the Protestant Reformation.

Immediately following the introduction of the printing press in Europe, something unusual happened: nothing. From the 15th century until the early 19th century, no new communication technologies were introduced to alter the way information was carried. As a result, Western culture had more than 400 years to get accustomed to the printed word.⁹ By the 17th century, the medium had become the dominant means of communication. These conditions embedded the bias of the printed medium deeply into the Western worldview and gave rise to the modern mindset that represented a dramatic departure from medieval European thought. This newly entrenched worldview was characterized by a strong emphasis on individualism, objectivity, abstraction, and reason, in contrast to the medieval worldview characterized by an emphasis on tribal, mystical, and sacramental experiences.

In some ways this might not seem like a new argument. These dramatic changes in philosophy and religion have long been attributed to the printing press and its role in the unprecedented distribution of new ideas to the masses.¹⁰ But it is rarely understood that these changes were caused more by the form of the printed word than by its content.

In fact, the majority of ideas being disseminated in print were not new at all. In the 200 years following the introduction of the



printing press, well over half of all printed books were medieval or ancient manuscripts.¹¹ The public had a voracious appetite for classical thinkers. Even Martin Luther's ideas borrowed heavily from Augustine's fourth-century theology and the ideas of the 12th-century Waldensians. In spite of this recycling of medieval ideas the form of communication during the age of printing caused the medieval worldview to dissipate and a modern worldview to emerge. Let me show you what I mean.

Mr. Subliminal

In addition to Mr. No Depth Perception, Kevin Nealon played another character on *Saturday Night Live* who illustrates an important truth about media—Mr. Subliminal. Once again the name tells the story: Mr. Subliminal has a unique power to persuade and manipulate people by whispering subliminal messages under his breath, frequently conveying the opposite of his explicit message. In one sketch, Mr. Subliminal is sitting at a bar, talking with the bartender.

Mr. Subliminal: A beer, please.

Bartender: All right, sir, here's your beer.

Mr. Subliminal: Thanks, partner (*on the house*). That was quick (*on the house*). What do I owe you?

Bartender: Uh, forget about it. On the house!

Mr. Subliminal: Oh? Thank you very much! Hey, you know something (*free cash*)? This is a real classy place (*free cash*). First time I've been here.

Bartender: Oh, I'm glad you like it. I've been working here for years.

Mr. Subliminal: Oh, no kidding (*free cash*)? That's great!

Bartender: [opens cash register and drops cash on the counter] Here ya go.

Mr. Subliminal: What's this for?

Bartender: It's free cash; take it.

Mr. Subliminal: No, really (*your wallet*). I can't take this cash (*your wallet*). I mean, what would I do with it?

Bartender: Well, don't be ridiculous! [drops his wallet on the counter] Here, take my wallet—you can put it in there!

Mr. Subliminal: Well, okay, if you insist!

Mr. Subliminal has an enviable talent of using subliminal messages to control people without their knowing it. As we shall see, the printed word has the strange power to perform similar manipulations. Regardless of what is being communicated, the printed word quietly whispers subliminal messages (*you're an individual*). The subject matter could (*you are objective*) be anything. Regardless of the content, we are (*think abstractly*) powerfully shaped by the form (*think rationally*) of the words alone. These messages of printing caused a cultural shift and an emphasis on the individual, on objectivity, on abstract thinking, on rationality, that—for better or worse—came to dominate nearly every aspect of social, political, and religious life during the modern era.

We could spend a whole chapter—or 10—studying the ways in which the printed word shaped modern culture, but that's for another book. Suffice it to say, print was the archetype for nearly every kind of mechanization that followed. By creating the first uniformly repeatable commodity, print became the first assembly line for mass production.¹² This linear, sequential form of visual organization was the basis for the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent methods of mass production used to make everything from cars to fast food. While all of this is worth understanding, for our purposes we will limit our investigation to four primary ways in which printing created the modern church.

PRINT MADE US MORE INDIVIDUALISTIC

In a predominantly oral culture, one in which communication is based on face-to-face oral speech, there is no means for storing information or knowledge outside of the mind. As a result, once knowledge is obtained, the culture depends upon the community to both retain and repeat that knowledge. With the introduction of writing, people are afforded the luxury to learn and think in isolation without the threat of losing those thoughts. As writing becomes the dominant communication system, people no longer need the community to retain teachings, traditions, or identity. As a result, they spend greater amounts of time reflecting in private. This increased isolation creates a new emphasis on individualism. Prior to the written word, a person's identity was completely bound to the tribe; the notion of the individual didn't exist. Because writing introduced the notion of the autonomous self, printing obliterated tribal bonds and profoundly amplified individualism.¹³



This rise of individualism led to an interest in the more personal aspects of faith. Writing allowed Christians to externalize and freeze the dynamic and fleeting inner life of thoughts and feelings. This had a remarkable cooling effect and provided distance from the emotional life.

This isn't all bad. One of writing's greatest gifts to us is the invitation to self-reflection. It created new spiritual practices such as personally reading Scripture, times of solitude, and prayer journaling. By contrast, oral cultures lack the ability to gain distance from themselves or others, which leads to a spirituality that is nearly void of self-reflection and the intimacy of a personal relationship with God.

Still, this shift from the tribe or community to the individual changed the way the church thought about the gospel. The modern age conceived of a gospel that matters primarily for the individual.¹⁴ The gospel was reduced to forgiveness as a transaction, a concern for personal morality, and the intellectual pursuit of doctrinal precision. In this view the Bible became little more than an individual's handbook for moral living and right thinking. As a result, printing had a tendency to erode the communal nature of faith. The church community became little more than a collection of discrete individuals working on their personal relationships with Jesus. The church became "a thousand points of light" and lost sight of the church as the body of Christ—a living, breathing entity, the essence of which depends on the binding interdependence of God's people.

In college my faith was nurtured in a distinctly conservative modern context. I attended a university in Fort Worth, Texas, and vividly recall hearing a famous local pastor speak about Christian discipleship. We all sat with pens and notebooks in hand, furiously scribbling down his every word. He finished his talk with the following statement: "I've never met a godly man who hasn't had a quiet time every morning!" Most of us in the room found that to be a reasonable and worthy goal and nodded in affirmation. In this view the life of faith can be distilled down to daily quiet times— individual time spent reading Scripture, journaling, and praying in an effort to get the right thoughts in your head and live a moral day.

Over time I've come to see a basic flaw in this viewpoint. Of course these disciplines are immensely valuable for a life of faith; the problem is not the practices themselves, but rather where we rank them. In this case these highly individualistic disciplines were placed

above everything else as the primary means to discipleship. The pastor's teaching (and my enthusiasm for it) expresses one of the great consequences of printing's bias toward individualism. It leads to the belief that the church exists primarily for improving my individual relationship with Jesus. Faith then moves from being personal to being private, a shift that is antithetical to the biblical understanding of what it means to live as God's people.

PRINT INTRODUCED THE NOTION OF OBJECTIVITY

The modern mind is very fond of objectivity. It wants very much to think about ideas like truth and belief in such a way that personal, subjective interpretation is ruled out. This way of thinking is a direct result of the technology of writing and printing, which separates the knower from the knowledge. For the first time people were able to stand outside their ideas and observe them on a printed page. This detachment had a profound effect, as it introduced the belief that we can stand outside something and judge it. In oral cultures, where there is no way to separate oneself from one's ideas, the notion of objectivity almost never emerges.

This objectivity isn't necessarily bad. The benefit to our faith is that objectivity temporarily frees us from the amorphous and tumultuous world of subjective experience by allowing us to get outside ourselves. It enables us to step back and observe situations from a distance, thereby gaining a stabilizing perspective on both ideas and relationships. The distance afforded by printing gives us the ability to act without reacting. When I am angry at someone and I take time to journal my feelings or write an e-mail without sending it, I am able to gain distance, calm down, and return to the situation with a new perspective. When I read something I'm not sure I agree with, I can stand outside the experience of reading it and ponder the idea—something that's difficult to do in a spoken conversation.

However, when objectivity is taken to its extreme, it leads to the belief that we can read and discover biblical truths with an unbiased clarity of vision. We presume the Bible presents an objective set of propositions that everyone will discover if they just read it properly. This inflated sense of objectivity, fueled by printing, breeds an unfortunate and arrogant illusion of omniscience. It leaves little room for subjective experience and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Subjective experience is inescapable. Whether I know it or even



like it, I read the Bible through the inescapable lenses of a privileged white American male who was raised in a Midwestern suburb. My reading of Scripture will be vastly different from that of a Latin American woman struggling in destitute poverty under the oppressive rule of a dictatorship. The subjective experience of our social location, among other things, has a tendency to magnify certain parts of Scripture while masking the importance of others.

This may sound like a descent into meaningless relativism, but it isn't. The fact that our subjective experiences color the way we read Scripture isn't a surprise to God. That's part of the beauty and mystery of Scripture. The stories of the Bible are remarkably adaptable to speaking to people in divergent contexts. We must remember that the Bible is not merely a collection of objective propositions. It is largely a story told through hundreds of different perspectives and diverse social settings. The mere fact that the Bible includes four versions of the life of Jesus tells us that subjective experience and interpretation have places in a life of faith.

When print dominates, we lose awareness of our subjectivity. Yet our subjective selves—our experiences, our perceptions, our personal histories—are where Christ meets us in our daily lives. Without a level of subjectivity, the Bible remains a set of abstract and distant propositions. The typographical bias toward objectivity is very valuable, but it has a tendency to erode both our humanity and our humility.

PRINT MADE US THINK MORE ABSTRACTLY

In an oral culture, once knowledge is acquired, it has to be continually repeated, or it will be lost. As a result, communication and thought patterns tend to be conservative, redundant, highly formulaic, and related to practical or concrete matters. Such patterns are essential for retaining wisdom and effective administration. Printing introduced a new way to store knowledge that no longer depended upon fixed mnemonic formulas and repetition. This freed the mind for more original and abstract thought.¹⁵ People were no longer bound by the pragmatic concern of retention and were free to think in more creative ways. But oral cultures, not possessing the ability to freeze words in space, find intellectual abstraction and creativity of little use, for these only serve to weaken their most central memories, traditions, and corporate identity. And keep in mind: the alphabet is

a collection of shapes that have no basis in reality—phonetic writing is an abstract medium. This simple attribute alone leads to a preference for abstract matters.

Here again, this shift in perception and understanding caused the approach to theology and faith to become more abstract as well. Prior to the rise of printing, worship was centered on the concrete practices of the sacraments, like baptism or communion. But with the new capacity and enthusiasm for abstract thought due to printing, the pulpit began to displace the altar and sacraments, like communion or baptism. Preaching became the high point of the worship service in the modern Protestant church. Moreover, modern sermons became extremely abstract, lengthy, and dense.

Consider the preaching of 18th-century evangelists. Theologian Jonathan Edwards often preached sermons that lasted up to four hours.¹⁶ George Whitefield, a contemporary of Edwards, preached one sermon entitled “A Preservative Against Unsettled Notions, and Want of Principles, in Regard to Righteousness and Christian Perfection.”¹⁷ The title alone reveals the tremendous preference for complex, abstract thinking during the age of print; it sounds more like a doctoral dissertation than a sermon. Move beyond the title, and you will discover that it is written with the same complex reasoning, lengthy sentence construction, and dense technical language characteristic of an academic paper.

You might presume these sermons were intimidating for the common audience. On the contrary, these were the great revival sermons of the day. Edwards and Whitefield were to the 18th century what Billy Graham was to the 20th century. Their sermons were so influential they became the primary force behind the Great Awakening, which gave birth to the modern evangelical movement in America.¹⁸ While these preachers had great intellect, their influence also reveals something about the nature of their audiences. I don’t know anyone today who could withstand a four-hour dissertation reading, let alone be moved to tears and convert on the spot. But in a culture so thoroughly shaped by the abstract nature of the printed word, those 18th-century audiences not only had the capacity to receive these sermons, but they also preferred such sermons.

Another effect of this emphasis on abstraction was that Protestants became preoccupied with getting their doctrine straight. Anyone who didn’t hold a particular set of abstract propositions in her head was deemed a heretic. As the modern age of print continued,



Christians began scanning the Bible to extract propositional truths from disparate places and contexts in order to organize their theology into abstract categories. This became known as “systematic theology,” a chief resource of the modern age and one that continues to be a core curriculum in most seminaries today. The benefit of systematic theology is that it helps us discover and create a coherent system of beliefs about the nature of Jesus, the church, and God—beliefs that shape the way we interact with the world. Taken to its extreme, as in the modern period, abstract thinking becomes detached from the needs of the world and the church. In many cases systematic theology has become an obscure discipline that rarely finds itself useful outside the walls of academia. In fact, a professor of systematic theology I know once remarked with pride that the discipline is only intended for academic concerns, not practical ones.

PRINT INTENSIFIES LINEAR, RATIONAL THINKING

As noted above, a phonetic alphabet is relentlessly linear and demands the sequential arrangement of otherwise meaningless symbols. It facilitates modes of thinking that reflect and value the same linear, sequential pattern. Printing amplified and greatly extended this symbol system, leading to modernity’s Age of Reason, in which linear, rational thought came to be the sole means of discovering truth. In the life of faith, the reasoning skills fostered by print extend our capacity for discernment. They strengthen our ability to use abstract logic, an essential skill in understanding the meaning of Scripture, among other things. For example, without these skills the letters of Paul are nearly inaccessible.

Paul was a highly literate person, and his letters reflect the kind of abstract if/then reasoning characteristic of a literate mind. This sits in contrast to the gospels, which are characterized by concrete storytelling rooted in the oral tradition. Prior to printing, medieval culture accessed Scripture largely through stained glass windows, which were well-suited to present the life of Jesus but were hard-pressed to articulate the dense theological reasoning of Paul’s letters. The printing press not only provided an appropriate medium for Paul’s message, but it also helped modern culture develop the reasoning skills necessary to comprehend his message. This is one reason why Martin Luther’s rediscovery of Romans resonated with post-Reformation culture in a way it couldn’t have before that point.

However, just as with the other effects of printing discussed here, problems arose when linear reasoning was pushed to the extreme, becoming the primary means of determining truth. This led to a belief that the gospel could be established and received only through reason and facts. When this belief became fully absorbed into the cultural bloodstream, we began to view the unknown as a threat, an enemy to be conquered. This undermined our willingness to appreciate and accept mystery, a crucial element of faith. Furthermore, because the printed word demands such intense cognitive processing, it tends to atrophy the value of the intuitive and emotional life. It makes us suspicious and occasionally even fearful of feelings as they relate to faith. This is one reason why the often-unbidden charismatic outbursts of the Great Awakenings were repudiated, even by Edwards and Whitefield.¹⁹

The modern preference for linear reasoning and suspicion of feelings is also well illustrated by “The Four Spiritual Laws,” an evangelistic tract by the late Bill Bright. In this pamphlet, Bright laid out the syllogism of four abstract propositions one must believe in order to be saved. Once the doctrines have been believed through reason and Christ is accepted through cognitive assent, Bright issues a stark warning under the heading “Do Not Depend on Feelings.” What follows is a well-known train diagram and subsequent explanation. (Notice that the linear, sequential arrangement of the diagram directly mirrors the form of the printed word.)



FIGURE 4

The train will run with or without a caboose. However, it would be useless to attempt to pull the train by the caboose. In the same way, as Christians we do not depend on feelings or emotions, but we place our faith (trust) in the trustworthiness of God and the promises of his Word.²⁰

The bias of printing is deeply embedded in this articulation of the gospel. The relegation of emotion to the caboose is unfortunate, for it reduces our view of people to little more than cognitive,



rational beings. Such a belief has a tendency to repress and devalue the emotional or intuitive aspects of our humanity. This directly contradicts the truth and model of the Psalms, which reveal that the emotional life is integral to worship, God's character, and our very being (as evidenced by Psalms 6, 13, 102, 103, and countless others). There is a holistic and interpenetrating relationship between our intellect, volition, and feelings. Scripture does not suggest a hierarchy among these elements of the human spirit.

PERCEIVING PRINT: APPLYING THE FOUR LAWS OF MEDIA

There are a host of other attributes to describe modernity and the cultural effects of the printing press. But for our purposes, I have limited this investigation to these four, for I believe they have the greatest significance for the church. Like all media, the printed word presents us with gains and losses. In an effort to codify and summarize these discoveries and their effect on the Christian faith, McLuhan's Four Laws diagram is a useful tool.

The Four Laws of Media

THE EFFECTS OF PRINTING ON CHRISTIANITY

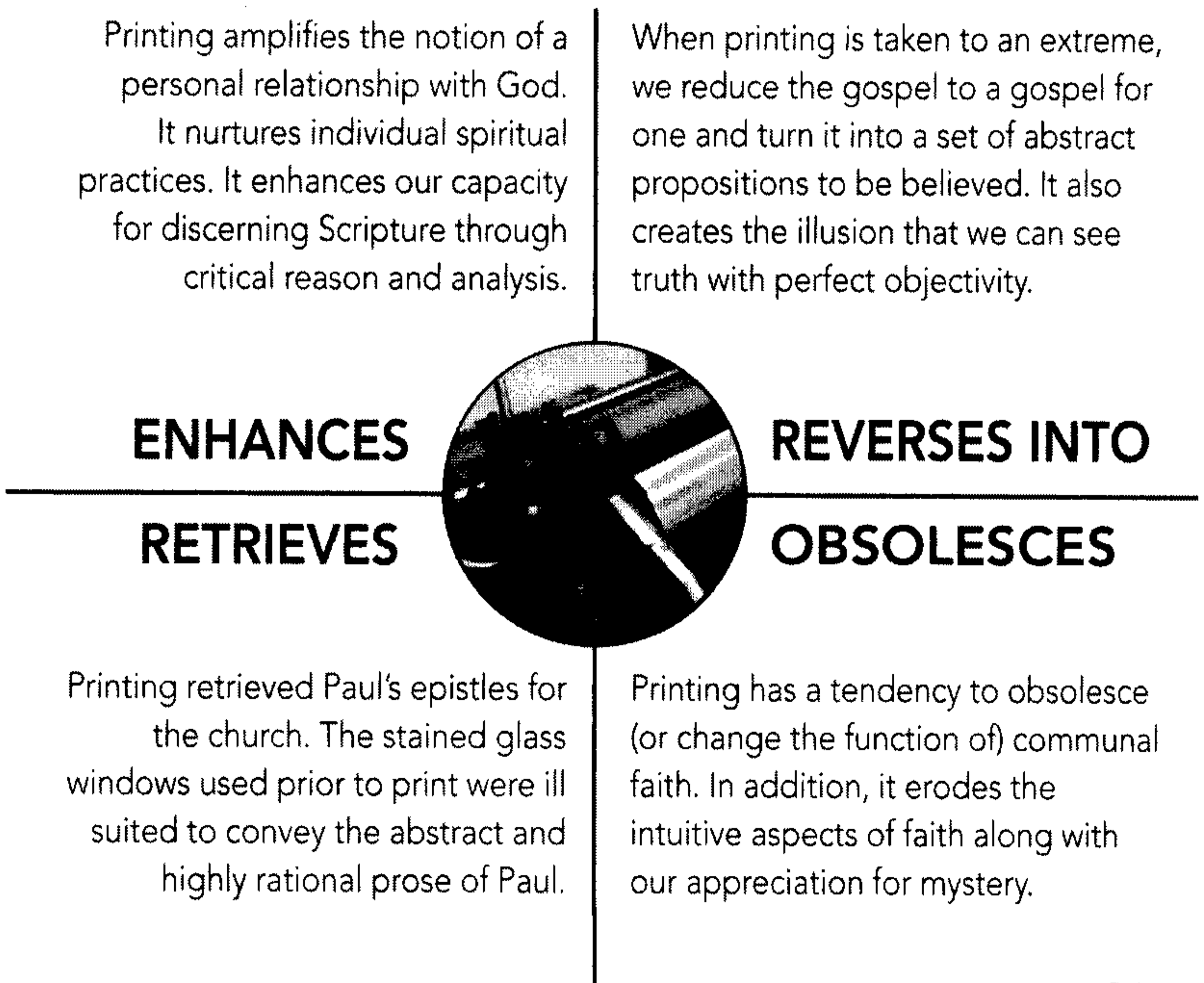


FIGURE 5

The answers offered here trace only a few contours of the effects of print. I encourage you to explore other associations and stimulate your own new connections; remember, these queries are nearly inexhaustible.

Like all technologies, the printing press presents us with gains and losses. Some are more significant than others, but the medium is in no way neutral. Some of these effects have been useful aids to the gospel, while others have left a legacy that has limited our understanding of the Good News. This perspective is not a call to become desperate or alarmed by these deeper effects of printing. Instead, our understanding of its power should help us employ the printed word with an intentionality that respects its subliminal messages.