

A Cyber-City on a Hill  
Internet Interactions Among Us

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*una commedia in tre atti*

*a Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici*

With gratitude to Brian Keegan, my Virgil to the Internet

## Prolog

We believe we have a special mission on this earth. We have the pure Word of God. Unlike so many others who have mingled with the world and been conformed to it by their very indifference to God's revelation and the slackness of their lives, we have set ourselves apart. We have dedicated ourselves to God's Word. We have vowed to live our lives in accordance with his revelation. We will not be the last Americans to feel this way. Nor were we the first.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other's necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the world, our community as members of the same body, so shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that, if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all confessors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us until we be consumed out of the good land whether we are going.<sup>1</sup>

John Winthrop knew the world would see his Massachusetts Bay Colony. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. But, more importantly, in the small world the Pilgrims were building for themselves, their personal flaws and foibles, their weaknesses and short-comings, could not be hidden from each other.

In the face of such close quarters and such desperate need, Winthrop urged the abridgment of self for the good of others and all. If they would not, they and their plans would suffer wrack and ruin. Their posterity would be cut off from the land by the hand of the Almighty.

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<sup>1</sup> John Winthrop. *A City Upon A Hill (sermon)*, 1630

Almost twenty years ago the WELS entered a New World, the “eighth continent,”<sup>2</sup> the Internet. We still haven’t come to grips with it. Do the rules from the Old World apply to this New World? How do we even approach this New World? The gatekeepers, editors and publishers, no longer decide which ideas are good enough and which attempts at written communication are elegant enough to see the light of day. Today everyone can self-publish. Forget about reflection and grammatical accuracy. Despite the quote attributed to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinions, but not his own facts,”<sup>3</sup> facts are not always the basis for reasoned arguments or impassioned online rants. Indiscrete pictures of members somehow get posted to our personal or church websites—where are those new Facebook privacy settings? We fear LinkedIn is exposing us to a deadly strain of self-advertisement. Didn’t our fathers warn us not to “toot our own horn?” Our actions and words can be viewed by all and, perhaps, as some claim, forever! How big this New World is! From it we can reach every continent and every person. It is like a parallel universe. Let all come and learn from us!

But how small this eighth continent is! We are in such close quarters. We can read the daily words and musings of each other, their on-the-fly assessments, their bulletin misspellings and the complaints of weary minds. As we react and comment to what we encounter online, we reveal more about ourselves than we do about what we are reacting to. A troll, an anonymous person who is abusive in an online environment,<sup>4</sup> online is a troll in person. A fool answers a fool in his folly and also picks a fight with a man who buys ink by the barrel.<sup>5</sup> Our personal flaws and foibles are visible for all who choose to look.

Let us approach, claim and colonize this New World. Let us cultivate the abridgment of self for the advancement of all. But first let us follow the counsel of Micah, to walk humbly, not only before our God, but also before our brothers.

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<sup>2</sup> Jeff Jarvis, *Public Parts*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2011, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> David Weinberg, “Too Big to Know,” WGBHM Educational Forum, February 5, 2012.  
<http://podbay.fm/show/250499991/e/1343624833>

<sup>4</sup> Jaron Lanier, *you are not a gadget*, Vintage Books, New York, 2011, p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2012, p. 197.

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## Act I

Martin Luther was no stranger to new technologies. He not only lived during the discovery of the New World, he was one of the cultural discoverers as he broke the stranglehold the papacy held over the consciences of western Europe.<sup>6</sup> Luther could not have reached so many people without the invention and widespread use of Gutenberg's press, not to mention the printers' constant need to print something popular and profitable. There was a price to pay in this New World with so much different, so much amiss. Peasant revolts, the slaughter at Muenster, his own dear church at Wittenberg defaced, Luther recognized it was the end of a world. "And take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife, let these all be gone." It wasn't an exaggeration.

Yet in this New World, Luther experienced the same old slander which now could spread even further afield. The faithful paid a terrible price at the hands of gossips. It was "intolerable to live among men in open shame and general contempt."<sup>7</sup> He relates how surprised a French doctor was to find the citizens of Wittenberg living godly lives. His king had told him "[In Wittenberg], there is no church, no magistrate and no married life. We Wittenbergers all live as promiscuously as cattle and each one does as he pleases."<sup>8</sup> The faithful are called heretics. The Word is perverted, misinterpreted, blasphemed.

Even God's own fall into this sin. "Everyone bears false witness against his neighbor."<sup>9</sup> They speak behind a person's back. Everybody loves to hear the dirt. Nobody yearns to hear the praise of their neighbor.

Certainly no one is to take the role of public judge upon themselves. A private individual cannot even reprove his neighbor publicly for what he has privately seen. "There is a great difference between these two things, judging sin and knowing sin. You may indeed know it, but you are not to judge it."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Evans. "The Literature of Crisis, Halmet (Lecture 1)", iTunes U/Stanford.

<http://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/the-literature-of-crisis/id384233897>.

Professor Evans masterfully illustrates how the discovery of the New Word shook the confidence and very self-identity of the Old World. He could have just as well been talking about the reaction of some to the Internet.

<sup>7</sup> "Large Catechism, Eighth Commandment" Concordia Triglott, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1921, paragraph 255.

All Large Catechism quotes are taken from my revision of the standard Bente translation which appeared in Luther's Large Catechism, Part I, Donald J. Pieper, NPH Bible Insights Series, Milwaukee, 1999.

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<sup>8</sup> Smalcald Articles, Preface,” paragraph 8. Again, my own revision of the Bente translation.

<sup>9</sup> Large Catechism, paragraph 262.

<sup>10</sup> Large Catechism, paragraph 266.

We leave judgment to God’s authorities, to the magistrates, preachers and parents, no matter how many long to try the case in the court of public opinion. It is clear here Luther is viewing functions of the state and society at large. Earthly punishment of crime lies with God’s authorities, as designated by the Fourth Commandment. Professor Bivens notes Luther’s “repeated clarifications regarding private and public judging, rebuking, with reference to our need to have a call to do so.”<sup>11</sup> Those who see things differently are “slanderers who are not content with knowing a thing, but proceed to assume jurisdiction, and when they know a slight offense of another, carry it into every corner and are delighted and tickled that they can stir up another’s displeasure, as swine roll themselves in the dirt and root in it with the snout.”<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to secret sins which are not crimes, where the authorities cannot act in a public fashion, “governments, father and mother, brothers and sisters, and other good friends, are under obligation to each other to reprove evil wherever it is needful and profitable.”<sup>13</sup> It is every impacted Christian’s duty to lead the sinner back to repentance. We are reminded of Jesus’ words that place no limitations to the steps that may lead to forgiveness. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault (Matthew 18. 15),” and “If you remember your brother has something against you, first go and be reconciled to your brother (Matthew 5.24).” Both the one who has been sinned against and the one who has sinned are encouraged to take the first step and seek forgiveness. There are no rules limiting this.

The manner is all-important. “Do not too readily spread evil concerning your neighbor and slander him to others, but admonish him privately that he may amend his life.”<sup>14</sup> If someone has not seen the sin for himself, he should keep silent. This admonishment should be personal. It is not to be done without the sinner’s knowledge, neither before the community, nor before the church tribunal. The point is to reform the person. How can such reformation come about if we do not go to the person?

But what if the sin is public?

“Where the sin is quite public so that they judge and everybody know it, you can without any sin avoid him and let him go, because he has brought himself into disgrace, and you may also publicly testify concerning him. For when a matter is public in the light of day, there can be no slandering or false judging or testifying, as when we now reprove the Pope with his doctrine,

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<sup>11</sup> Donald J. Pieper, “Luther’s Large Catechism, Part I.” “Resource” file on disc.

<sup>12</sup> “Large Catechism,” paragraph 267.

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<sup>13</sup> "Large Catechism," paragraph 275.

<sup>14</sup> "Large Catechism," paragraph 276.

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which is publicly set forth in books and proclaimed in all the world. For where the sin is public, the reproof also must be public, that everyone may learn to guard against it."<sup>15</sup>

Everyone in Luther's Germany knew what the Pope taught. They had been raised under the thumb of Antichrist. Not only in books, but in the abomination of the Mass, the veneration of relics and the monastic orders had his teachings sunk deep into the German consciousness. The public showed they knew what his sin was.

How do I know the sin is public? The public will tell me. When Peter rebuked Jesus for teaching that he must suffer and die, Jesus did not immediately rebuke Peter. Significantly, Peter's Gospel records, "When Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter (Mark 8.33)." It was clear what Peter had said was said publicly--all the disciples were shaken by it. Jesus must publicly rebuke Peter. Similarly in Antioch, when brothers from James came, Peter began to eat only with the Jewish Christians. Paul does not immediately tear into Peter. He sees that a public sin has been committed. "The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray (Galatians 2.13)." Unlike Peter's rebuke of Jesus, the effects of this sin were progressive. Paul allows it to develop until it was obvious to all something had to be done. Everyone knew what Peter had done and everyone had been affected by it. So Paul had to publicly rebuke his brother. "Those who sin publicly, publicly rebuke (1 Timothy 5.21)." I am not left guessing. I am not left to define what public is, especially on the part of a called minister. The public reaction will tell me.

Luther clearly lays out biblical principles for dealing with sin. First, leave the investigation and punishment of criminal sin to the God-ordained authorities, government, church and family. To usurp their authority is not only to take matters into your own hands and publicly rob a person of his good name but to sin against God's authorities. In matters of secret sin where the Christian knows about the sin, he is to privately go to the sinning brother and lead him back to repentance through gentle and private reproof. Further escalation of reproofing the impenitent sinner must be done with his knowledge, if necessary leading to a final, public airing of the sin, according to Matthew 18. In cases where the sin is public, that is, so public that everyone understands it is sin and is impacted by that sin, the sinner can be publicly reproofed without going to him. The sinner has brought himself into disgrace.

To make sure he has driven the point home, Luther adds that we are to do our best to "adorn the blemishes and infirmities we find in our neighbor, and serve and help him to promote his honor"<sup>16</sup> as opposed to the "poisonous tongues that are busy wherever they can pry out and

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<sup>15</sup> Large Catechism, paragraph 284.

<sup>16</sup> Large Catechism, paragraph 288.

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discover something to blame in a neighbor, and that explain and pervert it in the worst way.”<sup>17</sup>

It is all so simple and easy—on paper.

## Act II

Another age. Another New World. The same human beings.

The Internet provides tools unimagined just twenty years ago. We have undergone a triple revolution over the past twenty years, a Social Network Revolution, an Internet Revolution and a Mobile Revolution.<sup>18</sup> Through the Social Network Revolution we have established far-flung ties with all sorts of people. Each person on the social network, using a modest calculation, connects to 669 individuals.<sup>19</sup> Forget about the infamous six degrees of separation that link every one of us to every other one of us. Half the users of a social network like Twitter are connected in four links to each other.<sup>20</sup> Facebook, five, LinkedIn, three. We have much more contact with each other, contact that takes many forms, face to face, phone conversation, voice mail, e-mail, blogging, IMing, texting, tweeting, oh, and letter writing, magazines, books and conference papers. Through the Internet we can pass a huge amount of data instantaneously. The written word, audio files, video files (home-made YouTube as well as streaming) all reach us without hours of waiting for slow dial-up modems. And these messages can reach us anywhere, any time as this Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become mobile and personal (smart phones, laptops). Each of us is a networked individual.

How have we been using ICTs? Thanks to cell phones, we can now reach pastors on the fly, as they are moving from one place to another. My standard greeting to one of my brothers is, “What town are you in now?” Yes, I use voice mail for the older generation (45+), but I text for the younger. They won’t take the time to listen to voice mails. I finally knuckled under and got a cell phone when members and prospects started saying, “Call me when you get to the gate and I’ll buzz you in.” They do not have their contact number listed on the display and cannot remember the code to get in! If the youth minister expects any of his flock to show up for the youth group Bible study and fellowship, he must text them. E-mails are great ways to coordinate the Reformation Service and collaborate on the service folder. Be sure to

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<sup>17</sup> “Large Catechism,” paragraph 289.

<sup>18</sup> Rainie and Wellman, pp. 11f.

<sup>19</sup> Rainie and Wellman, p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> Rainie and Wellman, p. 55.

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forward some pictures to the church newsletter editor so she can post them to the church's Facebook page. Display ads can be "bulk mailed" for free over the Internet to go either to prospects' home computers or to their smart phones (2 pm on a Thursday is the time most workers check their phones for personal messages). Those who missed the Sunday service can peruse the sermon on the church website or even catch it on video. If they feel particularly moved, they can offer a donation through Paypal. What better way to encourage a hesitant member to visit the WELS church in her new town than by emailing her the link to the Google maps directions which will take her the eight miles from her apartment to her new church?

Information and Communication Technology is a quantum leap forward. How the pastor ordained a hundred years ago, riding his horse between his three rural Minnesota churches would have envied us!

Yet we carry old attitudes and habits more significant than QWERTY into our new technology. The twentieth century was the century of broadcast. Radio and television displaced a previous century's daily newspapers, magazines (weekly and monthly) and books as the leading means of disseminating information to the public. We assume the Internet is now filling this role.

That would be a mistake, which we make it all the time. I just checked my deleted emails and found the WELS Broadcast Delivery (unread). While the Internet is an Information Technology, it is not a particularly good broadcast medium. Broadcast reaches a large, indeterminate audience. Narrowcasting reaches a small, select niche. When there were but three channels on the dial, one could assume most of the people looking for passive entertainment would be watching one of those three black and white channels. With the explosion of information on the Internet, you have to know what you are looking for. No information, unless you are tied to broadcast mode compilers, such as MSN or Yahoo!, or have RSS feed alerts, will come to you. Broadcast is public. Narrowcasting is not. You have to search it out. Looked at another way, narrowcasting is like teenage conversations in the mall. Though the conversations take place in an area open to the public, the conversations are not public. Only a social boor would interrupt a gaggle of teens because of what he's overheard. We've all experienced this when we were within earshot of a person conversing on a cell phone. Everyone knows you are not to listen in.

What the Internet does magnificently, however, is function as a Communications Technology. It links people together in ways that were previously impossible. As a Communications Technology it can rock governments, as it did in the Arab Spring. Egyptian anti-government protesters passed information around on tweets and determined where and when protests were to be held. More recently we have seen tweets, not television images of a pass

interception in the end zone, end the NFL-referee strike. Think of a party line telephone that connects you to hundreds of people. That's the Internet. People share. People organize. People act.

As the Internet has its limitations as an Information Technology, so it has its limitations as a Communications Technology. People act in concert to a greater degree when it is a matter of outrage and protest. The anger spreads like an epidemic as bloggers link to other bloggers, tweeters retweet and e-mailers copy, paste and forward. Gather the mob and hand out the torches.

We are told all of these aspects of the Internet were in play in our circles some 15 months ago during the Time of Grace memorials. One referred to it, along with other activities of a blog, as the "elephant in the room."<sup>21</sup>

He was partially right.

The Time of Grace Memorial (2011-06U) originated as an internal working document of the Conference of Presidents, addressing the ongoing issue (2009-the present) of the Time of Grace Ministries (ToG). A new high (or low) had been reached in that ToG had been accorded Recognized Service Organization (RSO) status by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and was listed in its Lutheran Annual. In the April COP meeting the SEW District President had set forth how he was going to resolve the issue. This was not satisfactory to a minority of the COP.<sup>22</sup> The working document was fleshed out as memorial 2011-06U and selectively made available to various pastors in several districts in the last week of May, 2011. Between the dissemination of the memorial and the Synod convention, none of the co-authors, who remain for the most part anonymous, personally spoke to the SEW District President, nor did he seek to speak to them personally. The men who were fed the memorial then served as distributors through the Internet to garner supporting signatures.

One of the contributing authors had the integrity to put his name on the document. A number of the distributors in our district also had the integrity to claim, either in writing or verbally, a part in the process. We treat anonymity and the Internet below. Suffice it to say here that a man has the right, even in the secular world of the Internet, to face his accusers.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Earle D. Treptow, "Brotherly Admonition in the Ministerium," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, September 17-18, 2012, p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Phone conversations arising from this assignment were held with district presidents of the Southeast Wisconsin and Arizona-California districts in, September, 2012, as well as pastors in the Michigan and Arizona-California district. In addition, phone calls were made to Pastors Fred Casmer and Scott Stone to recount their work and recollections concerning the committee they were on which handled the ToG memorials in the 2011 synodical convention. I will not be footnoting information received from those calls.

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<sup>23</sup> Lanier, p. 63.

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I received the memorial as a Google document on June 11, 2011 where I could subscribe to the memorial. I never found out who was on the receiving end of those signatures as they were compiled. On that date it had 43 signatures. By the time Synod convened in late July, that number would climb to 92. This is hardly the makings of an Internet tsunami of outrage and protest. To gather even that many signatures in such a short time, however, would have been impossible if not for the Internet.

The initial ToG memorial did, however, produce an equal and opposite reaction. Within three days a memorial (2011-07U) countering it, authored largely by Mark Cares, was in circulation. By the time of convention, it would garner 50 signatures. Once again, without the spread of the original memorial through ICTs, the second memorial would not have been composed, much less signed, by so many within a two month span. I was urged to sign this memorial, too.

And, between the two memorials, it produced something else one scholar would argue is intrinsic in an Internet built around anonymity--hard feelings. "Emphasizing the crowd means deemphasizing individual humans in the design of society, and when you ask people not to be people, they revert to bad moblike behaviors."<sup>24</sup> The competing memorials became a crowd, not individuals. Some dehumanization entered as social (and theological) norms that should have mitigated the confrontation were removed by ICTs. The committee which was assigned these two conflicting resolutions heard from the principals, the SEW District President and Vice President, a pastor (not Pastor Mark Jeske) on the ToG board and the Synod President. Some in the committee were aware of voices outside the committee urging disciplinary action for the signers of the initial ToG memorial. Since the committee heard action was promised and already planned for the October COP meeting, they deemed it unbrotherly to insert the Synod into a process which had already begun and was continuing to move forward. To do otherwise could only make matters worse and promote disorder among the brotherhood.

So what has happened since? The committee did its work well. The tone of the discussion softened and the volume was turned down. It became "old news" to many in the Synod as they moved on to other pressing issues. The matter was more aggressively pursued by the SEW praesidium, with a meeting between them and the LCMS administrator in charge of RSOs. Because of the inter-synodical nature of the meetings, at Missouri's request, not only the SEW District President and Vice-President were in attendance, but also the Presidents of both the LCMS and WELS. While it should surprise no one familiar with the history of fellowship in the LCMS, their view of RSOs was fuzzy and not as hard and clear as some of us had imagined. We had failed to understand the position they themselves poorly understood. The meeting resolved that the LCMS would review all RSO organizations and bring RSO guidelines more in line with current fellowship teaching and practice within LCMS.

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<sup>24</sup> Lanier, p. 19.

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In the ensuing year, the LCMS has done what they said, reviewing and restructuring their RSO status. Because it does not have the required amount of LCMS member representation on its board, Time of Grace is no longer accorded RSO status. But Time of Grace Ministry is “a useful Gospel-media company that LCMS members and congregations can utilize and support.”

An effort to use the Internet to push for a resolution in convention utterly failed and, indeed, led to unforeseen consequences. The matter was taken out of our hands—LCMS “solved” our problem for us. Hard feelings persist.

The tale of the ToG memorials serves as a cautionary tale to the general WELS ministerium, but should serve as nothing more. Instead of addressing a break-down and erosion of our Internet dealings with each other, it speaks more to the need for the COP to come to some sort of brotherly working arrangement for handling ongoing disagreements about how doctrine is practically applied within their jurisdiction. At every level we need to ask ourselves first, “Is it really a matter of doctrine that is contrary to Scripture or scripturally-directed practice, or is it that I just don’t like his application of a doctrine?”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps more thought needs to be given to the actual role the President of Synod plays, if he is above the COP or a *primus inter pares* member of it. It is hard to see how limiting to three the signatories reported for a submitted memorial to the Synod in convention<sup>26</sup> will solve anything, much less the matter of transparent authorship. It only encourages further anonymity with all the perils that accompany it. Transferring the actions of some in the COP to some in the general ministerium<sup>27</sup> may not be helpful in soothing hard feelings. Surrogates seldom surrender, no matter how highly one extols the conflict resolution machinery of the Synod with shout-outs to the papers and efforts of well-received and thoughtful men as an appealing alternative to open brawls.

Yes, there is an elephant in the room. But it is a Disney elephant, sort of adorable and relatively harmless.

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<sup>25</sup> James R. Huebner, “Brotherly Admonition That Encourages Accountability,” Wisconsin Lutheran Seinary Symposium on Brotherly Admonition, Mequon WI, September 18, 2012, page 23.

<sup>26</sup> Treptow, page 18.

<sup>27</sup> Treptow, p.15. “So concerned that they [the pastors who created a website on which to post blogs about doctrine and practice in different corners of the synod that they deem questionable] prepared and signed a memorial to the synod convention.”

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## Act III

All invitations are not created equal. Our Sewing Circle displayed the treasure trove of quilts they had worked on through the year before they shipped them off to a women's shelter. The sign invited, "Sewing Circle, Everyone Welcome, Tuesday 9 am." Anyone who worked during the day would probably not feel welcomed, nor would male non-sewers. Similarly all Internet communications are not created equal, though one could, if the effort were made, investigate them. Many church websites post sermons and Bible studies, newsletters and bulletins. On the surface, they are intended for the public (and the pastor/webmaster may actually harbor illusions of grandeur that his words are reaching the public, the world, the universe). In reality, they are not. They are for the members, friends and prospects of that congregation who were not able to attend the worship or the Bible class, and who also happen to have the church web address and access to it. They are intended to minister to and remind this narrow band of people of upcoming events. It is narrowcasting, teenagers talking in the mall.

To publicly take a pastor apart because of a sermon or something else of his posted "on the Internet for all the world to see," at best fails to distinguish between narrowcasting and broadcasting. At worst it illustrates a detective mentality in the heart of the one taking his reproof to the streets. Perhaps he feels he must be the sword of God in this world to make all hew to the party line, which obviously is his. Luther would disagree, calling him a "poisonous tongue," busy to "pry out and discover something to blame in a neighbor, and that explain and pervert it in the worst way."<sup>28</sup> So would the Holy Spirit. "If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler (1 Peter 4.15)." "They get in the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to (1 Timothy 5.13)." It also reflects our practice over the years.

At a legendary gathering of all the Synod's circuit pastors in the early seventies, a veteran Minnesota circuit pastor took the floor and held an impromptu instruction session for the newbies. He always went into a town and simply asked people on the street what they thought of their pastor. Looking back in time, one envies the percentage of the population some of our WELS congregations reached! In metropolitan areas in our district the visiting circuit pastor would be like Diogenes looking for an honest man! In the ensuing silence, Jeb Schaeffer, a man at once beloved and avoided for his wit, plainly and gently remarked, "We don't do things that way."<sup>29</sup> We still don't. As we get used to ICTs, to display that investigative attitude towards

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<sup>28</sup> Large Catechism, paragraph 289.

<sup>29</sup> As recounted numerous times by William Godfrey, most recently in September, 2012.

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narrowcast sites will be as repugnant as stalker Michael Barrett video taping Erin Andrews through the keyhole of her locked hotel room and posting it to the Internet.

Emails, texts, IMs, all of these fall under private matters. For any of them to go public displays a breach of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment on the part of the one who is leaking them to the public.

Do we act in such a brutish way? We don't have to. Thanks to ICTs, if we happen upon something that strikes us as odd, we go to the brother and ask him what he meant, what he is doing, and are open with him that we may not quite understand it that way. This is really the first step we have to take, a step sometimes taken for granted. Just because my brother is doing something I don't do, that doesn't make him wrong, nor does my doing something make it right. If a theologian's job is to speak in such a way that he is not able to be misunderstood, it should also be the job of the theologian, and especially of the parish pastor, to seek first to understand. Even in matters that might seem to be public, brother goes to brother first with his misgivings and even his misunderstandings.

The easy segue here would be to state all websites that unabashedly claim to be public (broadcast) and strive to serve a greater, indeterminate audience, are truly public and, when they stray from norms of doctrine and practice, they have committed a public sin which can safely be blasted from a public platform (our blogs and websites). I can only think of a few sites which are truly public—Time of Grace, Truth in Love, wels.net and, perhaps, the Seminary and MLC. But if we think they are effective broadcast media, reaching the WELS and ELS faithful, we are sorely mistaken. The Internet is not a broadcast platform. Part of the work of the ToG committee at synod convention was to inform some of their own members of the issues! And these were informed laymen! One has to make a fine judgment call on whether the sin is a public sin or you are simply saying or doing things others would rather you not say and do. This has always been the case. There will be differences of opinion, as have also always been the case.

Once again, thanks to ICTs, the overwhelming majority of brothers who are troubled by what they see have gone to the brothers who operate these ministries and websites and have expressed their concerns. If no change in course is noted, one can assume our words fell on deaf ears, they thought I was wrong, or that they considered it a matter where brothers could disagree and pursue their own respective paths without sin. It is always best to make the latter assumption, especially when more explicit feedback is lacking. And it must always be remembered—being obnoxious does not mean a person is a heretic. You can and should always try to tone me down personally and smooth off my rough edges. The Lord will have his way with me, too, as he beats it out of me through the vicissitudes of life. But to hammer a brother in public for what he is rather than for what he teaches is not even Christian. And then, once the beat-down is administered, to move on to the next target, like we are in some slow-

moving news cycle, is to conform to the ways of this world. Since we are this uncomfortable mix of sinner and saint (how we long to be free from the sinner part!), we have to recognize with Pilate that a lot of animosity can arise from envy (Matthew 27.18). “Watch your life and doctrine closely (1 Timothy 4.16).”

We are a church body wonderfully equipped for conflict resolution, no matter what that conflict be. While we do not place supreme trust in our organizational hierarchy and interconnecting nodes of counselors and district boards, we do place supreme trust in the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit’s work we enjoy a strong bond of fellowship which reflects in a strong “brotherhood” within the ministerium. Yes, we all know where we have come from and, thus, have a good guess where we are now coming from, but we enjoy an openness with each other that is based on something more. The Holy Spirit has made us love one another. And it shows, even in the small matters. Phone calls are received and returned. E-mails are responded to. A text message promises a barrage of witty and laconic replies, fit for compilation. Love knows no distance and recognizes few boundaries. Far from ICTs isolating people,<sup>30</sup> Christian love makes it a tool to facilitate sharing and face to face meetings. The goal of ICTs are always “See+hear F2F IRL.” See and hear, face-to-face, in real life.<sup>31</sup>

With apologies to those experimenting with televangelism modes and megachurch approaches in the WELS, ICTs may, if not spell their doom, severely limit their target audience. ICTs encourage and promote sharing and interaction which does not scale outside the Internet. People want responses to their inquiries, reactions to their comments. This is possible with ICTs on the narrowcast scale, but not on the broadcast scale. This is the cost of fame. There is an imbalance of attention which is the result, not of technology, but of the human condition. Under the broadcast system, the consumer did not expect to be heard since there was no real way for him to respond<sup>32</sup>. ICTs allow response and foster an expectation of reply. The television preacher cannot personally answer the questions of his plugged in flock. The best the leader of the mega church can do is to enlarge his face on the screen and use technology to focus power on himself.<sup>33</sup> But power is no substitute for relationships. The mega church preacher cannot enlarge his ability to listen and respond to individual members. Ironically, it

<sup>30</sup> “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely,” Stephen Marche, The Atlantic, May, 2012, p. 60.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/>

<sup>31</sup> Jarvis, page 118.

<sup>32</sup> *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky, Penguin Books, New York, 2008, p.91.

<sup>33</sup> “Mediated Congregation—Architecting the Crystal Cathedral,” Erica Robles-Anderson, The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, April, 2012 (video).

<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/interactive/events/2012/04/robles>

would seem that the direction most WELS churches nationwide can trend towards (500 member congregations), may be an optimum size to have both the resources to tap into ICTs and the luxury of enough time to respond to requests using ICTs.

How blessed is our cyber-city on a hill! If my brother really is going astray half a world away, I want to reach out to him and find out if it's true, try to understand what he is going through and, if he really is in danger, perhaps be a tool whom the Lord uses to encourage and free him from the devil's snare. All of us agree--the man robbed going up to Jericho is on our side of the road. But once matters take a certain turn, once our leaders, called through their elections, have taken up a matter, we are going to trust their judgment, be open to any and all information they can give which will direct our prayers, offer any information and insight we can (even if they haven't asked for it, but especially when they have asked for it) and let them do their job. They will have access to better knowledge than I and they certainly have a call to take up these matters. What kind of spiritual optometrist would I have to go to to be able to see matters 1800 miles away more clearly than those who are on the scene? This attitude can prevail among our leaders as they work in tandem with each other.

Now that I have been so bold to speak, let me offer one last observation.

The Internet will and must change us. It must change our culture, the culture of the WELS. The Internet makes the biggest changes in organizations that are focused on information. Hierarchical structures historically have sought to control or limit the flow of information and communication as part of their conservative reaction to new technologies. At the very least we see it in warnings on being careful how you use the Internet.

### **Me and You are Smarter than Me**

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While the Internet can be a force for limited, collective action, it can be a wonderful tool for collaboration. Two heads are better than one. Do we WELS Lutherans still have the German stereotype within us, lacking a culture of sharing, saddled with competitive, antisocial attitudes? Are problems not to be exposed, because someone will use it against you? Are successes are not to be shared because someone will envy you? With an attitude like this, all we can do is repeat each other's hidden mistakes.<sup>34</sup> Collaboration offers a chance, no matter how slow, for consensus. Equipped with a collaborative attitude, we might be better able to make more constructive use of the misgivings of a brother over what we are teaching or doing.

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<sup>34</sup> Jarvis, p. 32.

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### **Say One Thing to Everyone.**

The Internet allows for a wide diffusion of information, information that anyone with a strong enough desire can access. While knowledge is power, it is not as powerful as it used to be. Authorities will be seen less as holders of hidden knowledge than they are as creators of relationships and bridges to resources which can tackle problems. To accomplish this, they will have to act with integrity. At the most basic, integrity is “saying one thing to everyone.”<sup>35</sup> This will go a long way in fostering an attitude of trust which is the foundation for collaboration.

### **Understand First, Then Be Understood.**

We tend to read into someone else what we are thinking. Trying to understand takes time. After years of wrestling with the issue of Crosswalk Ministries (F2F IRL), only when Gospel Dominance came up did the pieces fall into place. There will be some who always feel an issue is more urgent than others. Taking time to understand cannot be interpreted as not caring. Perhaps our possible misunderstanding of Missouri’s RSO will be a key to resolving ToG issues.

### **Mistakes Are Allowed**

Only the Holy Scriptures are inspired, infallible, clear and true. Our confessions are true only because they are founded upon and formed by these Holy Scriptures (*norma normata*).

When there is a high cost involved, everything has to be right. Once the ink is dry, it is dry. But ink never dries on the Internet. ICTs lower the cost of mistakes. It doesn’t have to be perfect. It can and will be changed, reviewed and revised. “An age of transparency must be an age of forgiveness.”<sup>36</sup> This is not a pretext to throw slop onto the Internet. “Successful networked individuals build trust and value for their partners by being accurate and thoughtful with the information they create and pass along.”<sup>37</sup> If this bothers us, because we view ourselves as infallibly precise theologians, with our rise depending on how many times our head has not appeared on someone’s platter, we’re the problem. Our people do not expect us to be infallible. They value the relationship of a pastor who cares for them, understands them and tries to apply the right mix of Law and Gospel to their situation. It is an art, not a science.

Another reason to be more accepting of mistakes is that more information is being created and spread. Before much of the Social Network existed, the amount of stored data tripled from

<sup>35</sup> Jarvis, p. 175.

<sup>36</sup> Jarvis, quoting Weinberger, p. 130.

<sup>37</sup> Rainie and Wellman, p. 226.

1999-2002.<sup>38</sup> We commit so much more to writing to benefit our people, even though (unless we pore over everything with a fine toothed comb) it exposes us to being blasted for errors which we are more than willing to correct when it is brought to our attention (with kindness, please). Even if correction comes a little harshly, it still is possible for us to hear it. Fostering an atmosphere where mistakes are allowed can avoid a culture of “Gotcha,” (which in itself is a form of slander) and can encourage a culture of collaboration.

### **I’m Here for You**

Finally, we need a spirit of collaboration, unity and amity. Celebrate each other’s successes. Mourn with those who mourn. Seek to leave a blessing behind with every interaction. ICTs allow us to spread wide our nets of concern and comfort as we seek to understand others, help and be helped in return. Where we will have the greatest impact is in our face-to-face contact with brothers, the unspoken goal of ICTs. We can derive great blessings from our brothers when we participate and contribute at circuit. Be of service to the district president if you have pertinent information. We can maybe even enlighten or be enlightened at pastoral conferences and district conventions. Don’t look for excuses to duck them. If our congregations are so strapped that they can’t send us, let them know that they are not “making budget” with such cuts. In whatever settings we find ourselves, make connections and leave information with others that may serve as bridges in the future.

We have done these things and we are doing them. But we need to remind ourselves of this and elevate this which the Bible also teaches. It is easy to be captivated by the doctrines of justification or fellowship. But one doctrine cannot be emphasized at the expense of another. Christians love one another.

The Holy Spirit has made us a city on a hill. It is not arrogance to recognize this gift and calling. ICTs have made us a cyber-city on a hill. Use the tools the world has given us for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom. Let’s dwell in this city together, shoulder-to-shoulder, not because we must, but because we want to.

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<sup>38</sup> Rainie and Wellman, p. 274.

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- Pastor Jon Buchholz, District President, Arizona-California District.
- Pastor Mark Cares, Director of Truth in Love Ministry.
- Pastor Fred Casmer, Chairman of Committee #21, Miscellaneous Memorials, at the 2011 Synod Convention.
- Pastor David Rutschow, District President, Southeast Wisconsin District
- Pastor Scott Stone, member of Committee #21, Miscellaneous Memorials, at the 2011 Synod Convention.