

How the Holy Spirit Can Guide the Church Through Digital Babylon

The modern body of Christ is full of nontraditional missionaries who use social media and digital tools to fulfill the Great Commission. As recently as 25 years ago, missionaries would surrender their lives to God; hop on a boat, plane or train; and stop off when they felt the Holy Spirit's prompting. But today, the Lord is raising up a generation of digital missionaries, who are using technology to share the gospel with the entire world.

For example, many people have never heard of Bobby Gruenewald, who serves as the innovation leader of in Edmond, Oklahoma—but they've probably used his app. Gruenewald is the founder of YouVersion, the world's No. 1 Bible app. YouVersion has been installed on over 358 million devices worldwide. Where missionaries used to smuggle Bibles into hostile countries, YouVersion can bring the Word directly to people's phones at no cost, translated in over 1,200 languages. Gruenewald says the internet is a game-changer for ministries—and it's an opportunity the church can't afford to dismiss.

"We're alive at a unique time in history," he explains. "God has put us here on this earth at this moment, when we have access to all these tools that can reach people all over the world. For us, that's not just an opportunity—it's a responsibility."

But it's not just about Bible apps. Christians are finding ways to share the gospel across every conceivable online platform. That includes obvious social networks like Facebook and Twitter, but it also includes Periscope, Instagram, Twitch and more. Evangelists on these diverse sites can preach

without ever setting foot in another city or country. And though the internet is host to many traps and temptations, the Holy Spirit is using these digital platforms to equip the saints and reach the next generation for Jesus.

Going Digital

Think of the internet as the new town square—a central place where people gather to meet, share life events and have fun. And like those old town squares, the internet can be the perfect place for an evangelist to witness and share the gospel with as many people as possible. But too many people neglect this outreach opportunity. In a June 2018 study, Barna Research found only 28 percent of Christians share their faith via social media.

That low evangelism rate is unacceptable for Jony Jimenez, creative director for UPPERR00M, a Dallas-based church. UPPERR00M streams all of its services online because, as Jimenez tells his team, “That’s where the people are.” Because of these online efforts, attendance is on the rise for both the digital and physical churches. Jimenez says it’s because the digital offerings make more people in the community aware of the church’s work.

But it’s not just about raising church attendance. If captured correctly, a digital audience can exceed even the largest megachurch crowds. Clark Campbell—co-founder of RVRB (pronounced “reverb”), which promotes clients online through streaming and social media—says technology makes the Great Commission more achievable than ever. Campbell works with major charismatic ministries, including Christ for all Nations and Jesus Image, and has seen the results firsthand.

“It makes not only business or financial sense to amplify a ministry’s message online, but also kingdom sense,” Campbell says. “That’s especially true when you’re trying to advance the message of hope, restoration, healing and the gospel.

750,000 people can gather to hear the gospel in Nigeria during a CfaN crusade. What if 200,000 or even two million more could experience that online?"

Jimenez says the Holy Spirit can still speak and minister just as strongly through smartphones or a computer screen.

"We all experience the power of the Holy Spirit in various ways," Jimenez says. "It can happen through a movie, a billboard or other bizarre ways. ... In the same way, technology like iPhones are just devices that share information. That information can be inspiring, informative, funny, entertaining—or it can be Jesus. Phones have a way of being unbiased. They don't care what comes out of them. So our goal is to allow Holy Spirit to do His thing through YouTube, Instagram or Facebook."

Digital Babylon

Led by the Spirit, the internet can be a great kingdom tool. But it can also contain plenty of pitfalls for God's people.

For instance, though Jimenez supports online streaming for churches, he says God at first told UPPERRROOM not to stream, post to social media or even have an online presence. Why? Because it might distract the fledgling church from what was truly important.

"The Lord was very specific early on about not going online or promoting our church," Jimenez says. "When the church started, we didn't have a website, Instagram, Facebook—nothing. Not because we didn't want it, but because the Lord told us to make it about Him and nothing else. Our goal was to minister to Him. When you lift Jesus, all men are drawn near. That's exactly what happened. Without any promotional marketing, people started showing up to church."

Two years later, the Lord clearly spoke to UPPERRROOM'S leadership again—this time, urging them to put their church

online. Now the church streams four services each week. During one season, the internet served as a snare for the church; during another, it was a gift from God.

“The internet is not good or bad,” Campbell says. “The internet is just the method we use to advance the gospel.”

Likewise, the same smartphones that bring the Bible to many around the world can be a spiritual hindrance to others.

“People have literal addictions to their devices and technology,” Gruenewald says. “Some people have been able to use technology to successfully connect them to the Bible or connect to a church. But then there’s others who say, ‘Man, I have a tough time having my phone open, even if I’m reading my Bible, without being distracted by push notifications.’ I think each person has to understand where their weaknesses are and what the challenges might be, and then manage that by putting appropriate boundaries in place.”

Christians must also be cautious to influence their friends online—rather than being influenced themselves by the world. For this reason, David Kinnaman of Barna Research Group has even labeled the internet a “digital Babylon.” He compares young Christians with Daniel and his peers, who were plunged into an entirely different world with a different worldview, one that opposed God. Daniel and his close friends were able to succeed in that environment, but many peers succumbed to the temptations of Babylon.

“Certain corners of the internet have become full of hate, despair and hopelessness,” Campbell says. “I think Christians today, our generation, have the opportunity to stand in the middle of that fire and be God’s light. We can be this power in the middle of that hell you find in some corners of the internet. We can use the internet for good—being a beacon of light, love, Jesus and hope.”

Digital Harvest

To avoid those snares, Campbell ensures that he and his team at RVRB follow the Spirit's leading online, especially when working crusades and conferences. He says he's made Spirit-led digital presence a core tenet of his web philosophy since RVRB's founding: "Even though we're not working in vocational ministry, we are tapping into the same Spirit-led resources and mindset."

When that happens, the internet can bring ministries three powerful benefits.

First, having an internet-based church can help people at their most vulnerable. Distraught individuals may Google resources for depression, suicide or health concerns they're uncomfortable sharing with their pastors. Gruenewald's team utilizes technology to serve ads or articles that help those people when they need it most.

"In that moment, we're able to draw them into community," Gruenewald says. "That's something you [can't] do in a physical context—to be privately in someone's home ... at the moment when they're by themselves or vulnerable."

That ad can then lead people to an online church or community, giving them a path toward life instead of death.

"The internet provides some really neat evangelism opportunities to share the gospel with people who are hurting," Gruenewald says. "Digital tools give you the ability to do what pastors alone don't have the availability to do."

Second, the internet can drive church attendance and Bible study. streams 84 services each week, with an average weekly attendance of 280,000. By comparison, Lakewood Church—the largest megachurch in the U.S.—averages approximately 52,000 people each week.

In addition, the YouVersion app has recorded more than 6.3 million Bible Plans started in 2019 alone. Within the first

few weeks of January, more than 2.7 million of those plans were completed.

The app also tracks a statistic called “Plan Day Completes” that breaks down like this: Each Bible Plan varies from three days to one year in length. Plan Day Completes count each day that is finished across all plans people are reading. If someone is reading the Bible in a year, they may not have completed a Bible Plan yet, but may have 14 days completed. By mid-January, tallied 48.6 million Plan Day Completes.

Third, the internet makes it easier than ever to reach beyond national borders and truly fulfill the Great Commission. Families can attend church services together even when separated by thousands of miles, in the case of deployed loved ones or missionaries serving overseas. In countries like India and Pakistan, where Christian churches are under constant persecution, the internet can provide a safe way for believers to attend church or fellowship with other believers.

“Technology is able to penetrate into countries and areas of the world where a physical church experience may be illegal,” Gruenewald says.

There’s never been a better time to go and make disciples. Finances, time or geography no longer have to be impediments to Christ’s Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20). {eo}

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