



Editorial



Matthew van Duyvenbode

Matthew van Duyvenbode is Director of External Relations, Advocacy & Research at Bible Society. A speaker and writer, he is also Secretary to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales Scripture Group and Chair of the Catholic Bible School

2015 was, for me, the year that Christmas turned digital. Having welcomed our third child to the world at the end of November, nearly all of our gifts and food – even our charity cards – were purchased online in a desperate bid to keep the diary as uncluttered as possible! And on that very recent of new 'festivals', Black Friday, shops who had braced themselves for queues and quarrels found themselves devoid of physical customers, who had instead chosen to scour for deals on their smartphones.

As we put up our tree, we took down our CD player, for it never to return, having been ultimately usurped by a digital dock. We streamed *The Snowman* on demand, and Skyped relatives across the world on Christmas morning. And, having followed Bible Society's #AdventChallenge on Facebook, watched the John Lewis Christmas advert on YouTube, and caught 140 character glimpses of new years experienced across the globe on Twitter, I felt I'd gone a little ... viral!

Yet in the midst of all of this, a shambolic nativity play in a draughty village church caused me pause for thought. Crashing in to the mediated and immediate digital media world landed a low-tech, no frills, awkwardly paused reminder of the Christ-child's enfleshment.

And I asked myself, how does this unfathomable, holistic, bodily fusion of godhead and humanity correspond with what sometimes seems to be an increasingly binary, untouchable and compartmentalised digital world?

In this edition of *The Bible in Transmission*, we have asked some of those who are operating at the forefront of explorations of where mission and Bible meet the

digital sphere to share with us some theological insights and biblical reflections on this deeply significant issue.

Roughly speaking, our articles reflect on two big missiological questions arising from the online revolution: how digital has shaped and will continue to shape our experiences of life and faith, and how we can intentionally respond to and shape this emerging digital world.

In the first of four articles exploring the impact of digital on significant areas of life, Steve Holmes looks at how technological development impacts our experience of the Scriptures. Starting with a seemingly throwaway phrase in Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, Holmes traces the Christian journey with the Scriptures from early codices, through the printing revolution and now online. By opening up questions of how technology is deeply intertwined with issues of canonicity, translation and stability, Holmes adeptly demonstrates that the latest technological developments around Bible access raise age-old questions as well as offering new solutions.

In turn, Marika Rose reflects on the overlap between the digital world and three interpretations of Genesis 1.27 to explore the possible implications of technology for humanity's self-understanding. Categorising these interpretations roughly as 'what we are in ourselves', 'our relationships to other human beings' and 'what we are in relation to the rest of the world', she draws on classic and contemporary science-fiction to illustrate how questions about human dignity have been posed over the past 40 years. Raising far more questions than proposing answers, Rose provocatively invites us to push the boundaries of our understanding of the

distinctiveness of humanity in a world of sophisticated machines and mechanised humans.

Our third article draws us back to our experience of church and mission, and explores what meaningful community looks like in a digital age. Pam Smith, the so-called 'Virtual Vicar' of i-church shares her experiences of how church can be experienced via the internet, and traces the development of online Christian communities from the 1990's to today. Smith argues that a movement that can be perceived as a curiosity or with suspicion belies the significant 'ministry of presence' that an online expression of church enables. As with our other contributors, Smith's article raises deep-seated questions – this time about ecclesiology and sacramentality – in a digital era.

Claire Bailey-Ross picks up on the theme of community in her analysis of how internet availability has impacted everyday social dynamics, emphasising the need for a balanced and critical approach when reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages that digital offers society. Demonstrating adeptly the significant inter-relationship between the mode of communication and those who are communicating, Bailey-Ross brings us to the very heart of the question about whether we are passive 'recipients' of digital developments or whether we have the responsibility and capability to shape the digital world into the future.

It is this shaping, a 'co-creativity', that Pete Phillips wants to emphasise as he reflects on how Psalm 8 offers humanity an authority and imperative to move with confidence into proactively exploring what it means to be a human being in a digital age. Drawing on the work of Marc Cortez, Phillips offers seven areas of reflection for Christians to consider about our individual and corporate identity. Musing finally on the implications for relationships between humanity and machine, Phillips envisages a potential future whereby the identity gap between ourselves and computers is far smaller than we might imagine.

Our final articles transition from exploring philosophical and anthropological perspectives on the future shape of a digital world to looking at practical examples of how Bible agencies are using digital technologies to represent the Scriptures in a digital age.

Neil Rees from our programme team here at Bible Society updates us on the wide variety of ways in which the Global Fellowship of Bible Societies are advancing translation projects and increasing the availability of the Bible through digital platforms. From developing machine assisted translation tools to responding to the explosion of access via mobile phones and apps, Rees highlights how an effective and timely response to the opportunities of technological development can allow us to be at the forefront of global mission.

Our final article is from Scripture Union, where Maggie Barfield has been Product Developer for the acclaimed *Guardians of Ancora* digital experience, aimed at encouraging children to discover Bible stories in the twenty-first century. Barfield paints a vivid picture of the

context for children growing up in a digitally saturated environment. Unpacking the implications for Bible engagement and faith formation, Barfield highlights the opportunities inherent in developing a game setting for children to explore issues of faith, identity, prayer and spirituality.

The irony of producing a print magazine to explore issues of digital life and mission hasn't passed us by here at Bible Society. You may already be aware that you can download all the articles in this and previous editions of *The Bible in Transmission* from our website at biblesociety.org.uk/transmission – please do encourage your friends and family to do so if you think that they'll find it beneficial.

Similarly, reflecting back as an editorial team, we're very conscious that our previous edition on Leadership was not representative enough of a diversity of voices, particularly those from female contributors. We acknowledge this was not good enough, and are working hard to ensure that this does not happen again. I hope that in this edition, you will see that we are addressing this imbalance in contributors, and are additionally heartened by two new voices on our editorial team – Dr Paula Gooder and Chine McDonald – who both bring considerable experience as theological contributors and mission practitioners.

This edition also marks the recent departure of our Group Chief Executive, James Catford, who himself brought enormous energy and charisma to our theological and missiological reflection as an organisation. During his 14 years at Bible Society, James helped us to explore the intersections of faith, society and the Bible (including the impact of the digital revolution), and I'm personally keen to thank him on behalf of the Editorial Team for his support of this journal over the past years.

So, whether you are reading this edition physically or digitally, I hope you feel excited, challenged, provoked and inspired as you consider the connection between online and offline living.