

## John Calvin and the church in a time of transition

### ABSTRACT

Why do Calvinist's need to reflect on the church in a time of transition? The importance of theological reflection in such a time is briefly visited. The importance of understanding transition is explored, emphasizing the skill of exegeting cultures, because being a missional church supposes a journey of discernment of reality and the world.

The culture in which this transition is played out is a new situation without precedence in previous generational or cultural systems. The transition in which the church finds itself at the beginning of the 21st century is described, using the metaphor of a storm to describe salient features of this transition. The colluding effect of three mega-trends – postmodernism, post-Christendom and globalisation – creates a perfect storm, challenging the church to respond creatively and boldly to the context in which it finds itself. The three mega-trends are considered with particular emphasis on globalisation and a focus on four insights in the nature of a globalised world that may be particularly relevant for the church, as formulated by Friedman in his book "The World is Flat": the new era of creativity; the new era of connectivity; the impact of uploading and the new era of in-forming.

### REFLECTION ON TRANSITION?

In 2007 an international consultation on the significance of Calvin's legacy gathered in Geneva. The consultation came to the conclusion that a fresh effort of interpretation of Calvin's legacy should be undertaken (Report of International Consultation 2007). This article is in response to their call on theologians and other academic disciplines to re-visit the heritage of the great Reformer.

Why do we need to reflect on the church in a time of transition?<sup>1</sup> Why do we need theological reflection on the fact and content of transition? Why does the celebration of John Calvin's 500<sup>th</sup> birthday implore a revisiting of this theme?

(1) Salvation entails the comprehensive restoration of creation. In the abovementioned report on Calvin's legacy, it is said that "The action of God is universal and all encompassing. For Calvin, it expresses the divine rule over all creatures, human and nonhuman. Nothing is beyond the wisdom and parental care of God." (Report 2007:3) God's saving work is in progress, reclaiming his lost creation and putting it back the way it was meant to be. All of human life and all of the nonhuman creation are the object of his restorative work (Goheen & Bartholomew 2008:51). Calvin's theology has a broad reach.<sup>2</sup> The Kingdom of God is the good news about the restoration of creation and culture. The embodying of the Kingdom must take cultural shape in our own time and place. Thus, theological reflection on the world, even more so in a time of transition, is inescapable. As Minatrea (2004:9) puts it: "Churches must continuously retool

1 In this article, transition is understood as a movement in society at large, a social discontinuity and paradigm shift to a new situation. It is nothing less than the birthing of a new cultural model.

2 Het hele leven komt in het vizier, in alle concreetheid (Buijs 2004:10).

themselves for effectiveness in communicating the message of hope in the rapids of changing cultures.” Proclaiming the reign of God over all events and things must involve some kind of interpretation of what is happening in the world (Newbigin 1995:37).

(2) The confession that the Word became flesh is one of the central tenants of Christian faith. Calvin placed Jesus Christ at the forefront of all our thinking and living. In honouring the name of Christ who became flesh of our flesh, the glory and grace of God are attested in our midst. “If we separate ourselves even by one single inch from Christ, salvation fades... where Christ’s name does not sound, everything becomes stale” (Institutes II.16.1). The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the act of sublime love and humility whereby God took it upon him to enter into the depths of our world, our life and our reality in order that the reconciliation and consequent union between God and humanity may be brought about (Frost & Hirsch 2003:35). The Word became flesh and announced the Kingdom in a particular historical and cultural context. The church is to embody this good news in particular cultures and contexts (Goheen & Bartholomew 2008:67). A truly incarnational ministry, honouring Calvin, requires critical contextualization.

(3) The reformed tradition is characterized by a strong emphasis on life and the world and an openness to understand the world<sup>3</sup> (Burger 2001:89, Niemandt 2007:47, Vroom 2008:202). Calvin brought God’s will to bear on all areas of life. His concern was that the glory of God be celebrated and witnessed to at all levels of life, that all of creation sing God’s praises in concrete and vibrant ways, and that the beauty of God’s will be manifest in our patterns of life both grand and small (Report 2007:4). Calvin’s emphasis on the calling of Christians in everyday life reminds us that a *coram Deo* life is always focussed on the everyday and the world, seeking to discern God’s will for all of creation (Swart 2009<sup>4</sup>). Faith has profound implication for life and the way we live in this world. Reformed theology is reforming theology. This assertion arises from the Reformed concern for the ongoing reformation of the faith and practice of the church according to the Word of God in the context of ever-changing circumstances and situations. The church is always reforming (*ecclesia semper reformanda*). Reformed churches understand their identity in the light of and determined by its historical faith. The church is always reforming and taking on new forms (*ecclesia semper formanda*). This results in a missional church constantly discerning the context and the proper ministry in that particular context, able to exegete the text (of the Word) as well as the context (world). Van Gelder (2007:59) says that the church acknowledge the importance of discerning the times and its context, therefore “The church must seek to discern what the Spirit of God is doing in relation to the dynamic changes that are taking place within a particular context.” Dingemans (2005:241) calls this the bridging function of a faith community – building a bridge between mankind, seeking to make sense of life and the age old Christian tradition that transmitted the gospel. He calls churches hermeneutical bridges<sup>5</sup> (:253).

(4) Calvin’s realization that the church is called to discern, in ongoing ways, its relation to the principalities and powers of the world. In our global context, this discernment includes the various forms of state and nation and the ever shifting reality of the global market (Report

3 “Dit behoort tot die wese van die gereformeerde tradisie om die Woord van God en nuwe omstandighede by mekaar uit te bring. Dit is vir gereformeerdes nie genoeg om God te probeer verstaan nie; hulle wil heelyd ook die lewe probeer verstaan. Dit is ’n openheid teenoor die lewe en omstandighede waarin die kerk haar bevind wat die kerke in hierdie tradisie nog altyd baie gehelp het, maar op ’n paradoksale wyse is dit juis hierdie openheid van gereformeerde teologie wat so ’n geweldige uitdaging aan gereformeerde kerke stel.” (Niemandt 2007:47)

4 “Calvyn se klem op christene se roeping in die alledaagse lewe herinner ons daaraan dat ons lewe voor die aangesig van die lewende, sprekende God altyd ’n gerigtheid op die wêreld en gewone lewe beteken.” “Calvyn en die breër gereformeerde tradisie (beklemtoon) dat ons God se wil onderskei op elke terrein van die ganse skepping en totale lewe.” (Swart 2009)

5 Buijs (2004:14) sees Calvinism as an ideal bridgebuilder: “En dan komt al snel in enigerlei vorm het calvinisme in beeld om de brug van de zondag naar de maandag te slaan.”

2007:4). The speed, diversity, and complexity of social and cultural change in a globalising world poses big challenges to Reformed theology with its particular openness to contemporary cultural developments. Bearing in mind Franke's (2003:2) caution that *theologia reformata et semper reformanda* can sometimes appear "to be at the mercy of the shifting *Zeitgeist*" in which it falls "victim to the cultural stress of innovation", one is nevertheless challenged to reflect on theology and church in this transition.

(5) We are living in an open society where surprising new attention for religion, values and norms can be seen. Christians feel free to participate and be in dialogue with politics, art, education, music and community life. In his work on the church, Heitink (2007:351) is wondering if the winter of secularization is not thawing away in 'n new spring, giving birth to new religious life. He states that the time has arrived that the church can abandon its recent inwards centeredness and starts participating in public life, posing question such as how a Christian life can influence society and advance humanity? In similar vein, Buijs (2004:5) argues that Calvinism is able to reformulate the relationship between church and world and is ideally suited to participate in a life-giving enterprise - "the affirmation of everyday life."<sup>6</sup>

## EXEGETES OF SCRIPTURE AND CULTURE

How is this theological reflection on the fact and content of transition, this hermeneutical bridge building and affirmation of everyday life, accomplished?

One must be reminded of Calvin's engagement with Scripture. For him, the Bible is at the heart of the church's life, ever to be read and studied by each one of God's people (Report 2007:3). This explains the familiar emphasis on proper exegesis of the Bible.

According to Gibbs (2005) there is a second skill that is equally important - the skill to exegete our culture: "We need to learn, as a matter of urgency, how to exegete our cultural context." Jonker's (1976:45-46) emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between the text (Scripture) and context, and the determinant role of Scripture in the controlling position must be called to mind.<sup>7</sup> The exegeting of culture is thus a process of *critical* contextualization. As Gibbs puts it:

"The gospel of Christ relates to any culture in a complex manner. Some elements it will affirm as evidence of common grace. Other elements are cultural aspirations that can only be realized by the transforming impact of the gospel. And there are dark and destructive elements in every culture from which we will need to be delivered."

If one takes the concept of the *Missio Dei* seriously, the resultant missional understanding of the church as participating in God's mission in this world (Bosch 2004:390, Guder 2000:20, McNeal 2009:25, Swart 2009), supports the importance of cultural and contextual exegesis. Theology is the interpretative help for translating the activity of God in his world (Visser 2009:3). Being a missional church helps a journey of discernment of the reality and world (Keifert 2007:53), asking questions such as "What in heaven's name is going on here? What is God up to in this place and time, in the relationships both within and without the local church?" It is a challenge to grasp the spirit of contemporary culture and to baptize it in the stream of truth that flows out

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6 Buijs (2004:5) calls it "benaming van het alledaagse". He says that Calvin called for moral discernment in the light of changes in society - "...de houding van Calvin tegenover allerlei ontwikkelingen in de samenleving is niet die van de simpele afwijzing op voorhand, maar van de morele weging." Vroom (2008:202) says one of the most promising approaches for the further study of Reformed identities will be the issue of hermeneutics - the reading of scripture in differing contexts.

7 "Eintlik gaan dit in die prediking om 'n voortdurende heen-en-weer-beweging tussen die Skrif en die situasie. Die beslissende saak waarom dit in hierdie beweging gaan, is of die Skrif daarin die beheersende posisie behou." (Jonker 1976:47)

of God's own immersion in the world through his incarnation in the person of Jesus (Anderson 2007:59). The work of God must be read and interpreted along with the word of God. Both are gospel narratives and each interprets the other.

This interpretation process brings spirituality in focus, especially corporate spiritual discernment. Keifert's (2007:53) faith practises of "Dwelling in the Word" and "Dwelling in the World" gives a clue to ways in which this corporate discernment in a time of transition can contribute to a rediscovery of Calvin's heritage. As Franke (2003:37) says "... the church must grapple with the meaning and implications of the biblical message for its context as it listens patiently and expectantly for the voice of the Spirit speaking afresh through Scripture and yet in continuity with the Spirit-guided trajectory of the tradition and confessional heritage of the church."

## A PERFECT STORM

In exegeting culture and thus discerning what God is up to, the metaphor of a storm can be used to describe the transition in which the church finds itself at the beginning of the 21st century. The term "Perfect Storm"<sup>8</sup> is used by Sweet (2008:2, 2007:17) to describe the biggest cultural storm in the history of Christianity. It is causing a wave of change that is forever changing the face of the world and the church. Roxburg & Romanuk (2006:5) state: "We are moving through a period of volatile, discontinuous change." The most predictable thing about the stormy future is that it never conforms to our expectations. It will toss up surprises that will take our breath away.

Sweet (2007:20-36) and Niemandt (2007:10-11) describe three waves breaking simultaneously over the world and church – constituting three mega-trends that begs to be understood as part of a process of exegeting context. First is the tsunami known as postmodernity. The second storm is post-Christendom. The third storm is globalisation – living in a post-scale world. All three constitute a perfect storm – and "...no compass has ever been invented for the perfect storm" (Sweet 2008:4).

In this article only brief attention will be given to the first two storms (megatrends), with a broader focus on the third.

### Postmodernism

Volumes have been published on postmodernism – called the aftermath of modernity and reaction to modernism - and it has grown to be a phenomenon much broader than Western worldview (Sweet 2007:20). It is important to realize that a precise understanding of postmodernity is difficult to pin down. Nevertheless, it has become almost a commonplace to refer to the contemporary cultural situation as "postmodern", describing a paradigm shift or movement from one prevailing worldview to another (Franke 2003:8). Roxburgh (1998:8) describes it as "a period of fundamental change in terms of values, spiritual consciousness and worldview." Postmodernism refers to a cultural, intellectual, or artistic state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle and embodying extreme complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity, interconnectedness or interreferentiality. The term is best understood as referring primarily to the rejection of the central features of modernity.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase "perfect storm" originates from the 1997 book *The Perfect Storm* which refers to the simultaneous occurrence of weather events which, taken individually, would be far less powerful than the storm resulting of their chance combination. Since the 2000 movie by the same name, the phrase has gained popularity and grown to mean any event where a combination of circumstances will aggravate a situation drastically. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfect\\_storm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfect_storm). Accessed on 16 June 2009.) See also Phipps (2009:37).

Postmodernism challenges the church with the force of a cultural tsunami. Gibbs (2005) and Goheen & Bartholomew (2008:111-114) identifies it as one of the important trends the church must exegete.<sup>9</sup>

### Post-Christendom

Christendom can be described as the explicit or implicit attempt of the Christian church to act from a position of power, privilege or patronage to impose Christian values by the use of social and political power<sup>10</sup> (Wright 2000:17-18). Christendom is dying in the very place that nurtured and gave it life for centuries – the Western world. The Christian faith has all but lost its influence in many Western communities, ceasing to be the glue that gives coherence to society. It is dying, or as Robinson & Wall (2006:9) says: “While Christendom continues to be with us in many ways, it is dead and gone in other ways.” Hall (1995:1) calls it the winding down of a process that was inaugurated in the fourth century and one of the great social transitions in history. The close network of mutual relationships between the gospel, church, state, civil society and culture is breaking down (Nieder-Heitmann 2009:23). Gibbs (2005) says the shift from a Christendom to a Post-Christendom cultural context is one of the megatrends having a profound impact on the church.

The best description of this growing post-Christendom, secular world is most probably that by Taylor in his seminal *A Secular Age* (2007:1):

“The difference would then consist in this, that whereas the political organization of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection.” “Put in another way, in our ‘secular’ societies, you can engage fully in politics without ever encountering God, that is, coming to a point where the crucial importance of the God of Abraham for this whole enterprise is brought home forcefully and unmistakably.” (Taylor 2007:1)

Taylor (2007:12) describes this as a “titanic change” where people no longer see reality as only one possibility determined by Christian faith, but rather sees them as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have various ways to coexist.<sup>11</sup> Religion is fractionalizing, and the power and ability to bring together many people under a single religious banner is dwindling (Penn & Zalesne 2007:314). Reflecting on the long history of Christianity, Hall (1995:51) states: “Christianity has arrived at the end of its sojourn as the official, or established, religion of the Western world.” (Hall 1995:51)

### THE THIRD STORM – A FLAT, GLOBAL WORLD

The third trend contributing towards the perfect storm is globalisation. Goheen & Bartholomew (2008:7,116) calls the “story of progress called globalization” one of the significant complications

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9 “The second mega-trend is the slide from modernity to postmodernity. Few of us like the latter term, but nobody has yet come up with a preferred alternative. Europe and North America have felt the strains and stress of moving from tradition to modern to postmodern within the span of 250 years. In Africa, Latin America and Asia this process has occurred within 40 years.” (Gibbs 2005)

10 The term has been used by Troeltsch and refers to the situation that originated in the Roman empire in the 4th century when Constantine legalised Christianity and when Theodosius declared it the official religion of the empire (Nieder-Heitmann 2009:23).

11 Penn & Zalesne (2007:313) calls this a kind of splintering, evolving, proliferating change that is becoming more and more intense. It is perhaps because of the loss of the traditional religions’ influence that more and more varied religious efforts take root.

of the modern story. It is shaping everything, because globalisation is political, technological and cultural, as well as economic. It is not surprising that Gibbs (2005) emphasizes that many of the changes facing the church today are global in nature. Giddens (2002:4) also says that “Globalisation is restructuring the ways in which we live, and in a very profound manner.” Fact of the matter is that all issues nowadays are global. We live in a global interconnected biosphere – economically, genetically, politically, biologically, culturally.

“We have become a multi-everything global community living on a beautiful, awesome, mysterious ball of life orbiting through the vast darkness of space. So the realities of poverty, disease, terrorism, violence, climate change, misogyny, obscene wealth – every aspect of life on earth is interconnected and global in scope.” (Phipps 2009:37)

Exegeting globalisation is of critical importance – the church we came to know in the last 2000 years with its Greco-Roman touch and feel is on the way out and globalisation is forming a new worldwide Christian faith. The international consultation of theologians state (Report 2007:4):

“Calvin acknowledges, as well, that God’s glory can be proclaimed and embodied outside the church and that the Christian community is called to engage her global neighbours with both humility and bold vision. The church realizes that the form and content of this engagement will vary from place to place and time to time, in ways as manifold and rich as the faithful lived realities of God’s creation itself. Nevertheless, it cannot but obediently and gratefully respond to God’s Word in the present, and as such, be a constructive witness to Christ.”

Buijs (2004:11) emphasizes the fact that Calvinist theology is one of thanking God for grace, but not a grace experienced in the privacy of personal spirituality. Because faithful life is all about thanking the Creator of everything and living from grace, the Calvinist lives in a way to that brings thanks to the Creator by remaking everything according to His will.<sup>12</sup> The gifts of creation are abundantly at our disposal. But this does not mean that they may be squandered and wasted. Because they are in fact God’s gifts, they are of immeasurable value and must be dealt with carefully (Vischer 2007:4).

The burning question is: How would a global Christian faith look and feel like? Friedman wrote two important works on globalisation – *The World is Flat* (2005) and *Hot, Flat and Crowded* (2008). His first work is utilized to focus briefly on the all-encompassing changes in context heralded in by this process of globalisation. Friedman describes the globalised twenty-first century world as a world flattened<sup>13</sup> by new technologies:

“It is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world – using computers, e-mail, fibre-optic networks, teleconferencing, and dynamic new software.” (Friedman 2006:8)

He describes it as “Globalization 3.0”, a phenomenon that is enabling, empowering, and enjoining individuals and small groups to go global seamlessly in the “flat-world platform”. This new global era is described by Miller (2004:76) as a shift to a new digitally defined culture that is much more than just a change in technology, attitude, and understanding. It is a sensory change where change itself becomes the only constant and the organizing principle. For the first time since ancient times, we have the perceptual capabilities to see the world not just as our little corner of

<sup>12</sup> “Een calvinist ... verlangt ... dat de wereld waarin hij rondloopt ook zo is zoals de Schepper deze graag ziet.” (Buijs 2004:11)

<sup>13</sup> Sweet (2007:29) calls it a post-round world.

the globe but as an interconnected multidimensional whole (Miller 2004:ix).

If mission is God's turning to the world (Bosch 2004:376) what does that mean for a "flat", globalised, changing world? If thinking of the church is thinking of the world to which it is sent (Bosch 2004:377), what does it mean for a coherent style of Christian engagement with the problems of the 21st century? Let's turn to Friedman.

Friedman describes ten forces ("world flatteners") that influenced interconnected globalisation:

(1) The new age of creativity which started with the unleashing of global creativity when communism and the Berlin wall fell, tipping the balance toward those advocating democratic, consensual, free-market-oriented governance.

(2) The new age of connectivity when digital content could be sent anywhere at little or no cost, the advent of the World Wide Web. It enables more people to interact with more other people on the planet than ever before (Friedman 2006:77).

(3) Work flow software, which enables work to flow digitally and seamlessly connects everybody with everybody through transmission protocols. The revolution in work flow is leading to an explosion of experimentation and innovation (2006:91).

(4) Uploading – harnessing the power of communities. By this Friedman means the ability, even of individuals or small communities, to produce products of substance and complexity without the need for a hierarchical organization or institution.

(5) Outsourcing – or supercharged globalisation. Outsourcing is a new form of collaboration – it is subcontracting a process, such as product design or manufacturing, to a third-party company. The decision to outsource is often made to make more efficient use of land, labour, capital, technology and resources.

(6) Offshoring – the Chinese phenomenon. The relocation of business processes from one country to another where it is usually done much cheaper and productively. This unleashed an unprecedented period of global prosperity (Friedman 2006:150).

(7) Supply-chaining – "the process that 'delivers stuff' across the globe – involving dozens of suppliers, distributors, port operators, customs brokers, forwarders, and carriers in a finely tuned chain operating in concert." (Friedman 2006:152)

(8) In-sourcing – a new form of deep collaboration, involving a huge amount of trust, where one company does work on behalf of another company. Friedman (2006:175) describes this as a process of enabling platforms for anyone to take business global or to vastly improve the efficiency of the global supply chain.

(9) In-forming: "Never before in the history of the planet have so many people – on their own – had the ability to find so much information about so many things and about so many other people." (Friedman 2006:177).

(10) The steroids: digital, mobile, personal, and virtual. Technology is making digital collaboration and sharing of information mobile. Data communication through increasingly powerful, mobile devices able to compute incredible amounts of data anywhere is becoming the norm – and it can be done by you, just for you, on your own device.

It is impossible to summarize Friedman in a brief paper, but the following insights in the nature of a globalised, runaway world are particularly relevant for the church in reflecting on Calvin and the church in a time of transition:

- a new era of creativity;
- a new era of connectivity;
- the impact of uploading;
- a new era of in-forming.

### **A new era of creativity**

The era of democratic, consensual, free-market-oriented governance, coupled with the rise of the Windows enabled PC, eliminates the barrier on the amount of information that any single individual can amass, author, manipulate and diffuse. It allows individuals to become the authors of their own content (Friedman 2006:52-59). The unleashing of creativity challenges the church and theologians to a new kind of creative reflection on the church (Niemandt 2007:112). The chaos of cultural change is a God-given space for creative innovation where the church is summoned to discern a pattern for living the gospel that is appropriate for our creative age. Taylor (2005:72) correctly sees this opportunity to listen to previously unheard questions and unspoken answers as a missiological challenge to allow the human imagination to seek new creative opportunities. Bosch (2004:431) called this the dimension of *poiesis* - the representation of evocative images because people not only need truth and justice, they also need beauty. The great challenge for anyone participating in church and theology is to do it creatively. Imagination, creativity and being the image of God (*imago Dei*) is very much the same (Niemandt 2007:112). Forbes (1986:18) makes the point that "Imagination is the *imago Dei* in us."

Perhaps Sweet's (2009:56) provocative creativity says it best:

"The church needs to rediscover the Missionary Position, a posture that forces us to look at the world eye-to-eye and face-to-face without turning our backs. The Missionary Position tries to get together with the world in a healing and so beautiful way. It doesn't view the world as a 'market' but as a 'mission'". And: "The impulse to create, to conceive, is what lies at the heart of the missional." (2009:58)

The church in a time of transition needs to rediscover its creative dimension to conceive new ways to encounter contemporary culture. We need to be imaginative, reading the metaphors and handling the symbols. Miller (2004:113) underlines the importance of the observer's intimacy with the message: "the artist might become more of a facilitator of real-time experiments in altered perspectives stimulated by the content and the observer's unique response".

### **A new era of connectivity**

The next world flattener is "the new era of connectivity". The ability to send digital content anywhere at little or no cost enables more people to communicate and interact with more people anywhere on the planet than ever before (Friedman 2006:77). It is more than mere communication – instantaneous electronic communication isn't just a way in which news or information is conveyed more quickly, its existence alters the very texture of our lives (Giddens 2002:11). It is giving birth to a new kind of humanity – as Gutenberg culture produced a people of the book, Google (connective) culture produces a people of the screen (Sweet 2009:35). "The secret to the power of the Reformed tradition lies within the rational worldview of print cultures. The secret to discovering the power of the emerging convergent church lies within the connected interactive worldview of the digital medium" (Miller 2004:140-141).

Penn & Zalesne (2007:253) shows that technology is not the anti-social force once associated with it. Technology plays the opposite role. The social uses of technology, with its new emphasis on "connection" have far outstripped the antisocial, individualistic purposes technology used to serve. The growth of social networks and connected communities such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and many other bear witness to this growing phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> TIME featured the developers of Twitter software as part of the 100 most influential people in 2009:

<sup>14</sup> According to Wikipedia (accessed on 29 April 2009) Twitter had 4-5 million users. Facebook is ranked as the largest social network, followed by MySpace and Twitter. In March 2009, a Nielsen.com blog ranked Twitter as the fastest growing site in the Member Communities category for February 2009. Twitter had a growth of 1382% and Facebook 228%! (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>)



“Years from now, when historians reflect on the time we are currently living in, the names Biz Stone and Evan Williams will be referenced side by side with the likes of Samuel Morse, Alexander Graham Bell, Guglielmo Marconi, Philo Farnsworth, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs — because the creation of Twitter by Stone, Williams, and Jack Dorsey, is as significant and paradigm-shifting as the invention of Morse code, the telephone, radio, television or the personal computer.” (TIME 2009a: 30)

In the June 15<sup>th</sup> issue, TIME (2009c:28-33) took it even further, announcing Twitter under the heading “How Twitter will change the way we live”. Twitter developed into a powerful form of communication. It enables user’s social warmth and adds a second layer of discussion on many conversations. TIME predicted that the key elements of the Twitter platform – the follower structure, link-sharing and real-time searching – will persevere regardless of Twitter’s fortunes. In an on-line article, Van Wyk<sup>15</sup> hails Twitter’s ability to change debate into dialogue, calling it modern day “manna from heaven.” Twitter has the ability to invite multiple participants into dialogue on any issue. It already has changed the face and texture of conferences<sup>16</sup> and worship services.<sup>17</sup>

The apparent ability of this new era of connectivity to form community, serves as proof of Sweet’s (2000:113) prediction that the Internet will become less a disseminator of information and more a social medium. Personally, two events underlined this ability to form real community. A colleague with whom our team have the best of personal relations chose Facebook to announce the fact that she was in a newfound relationship. The news was posted on Facebook before she informed us of the love of her life! When a student at the Faculty of Theology at Pretoria died after a serious car accident, a grieving Facebook community of more than 1400 formed within days. Afrikaans philosopher Johann Rossouw (2009:11) remarks that social technologies can not replace physical presence, but it extends the reach of both the body and the being, enabling community over ever increasing distance.

The unrestricted connecting of the world challenges the church and theologians to a new kind of creative reflection on the importance of networks and personal relations. It does even more than that. It is in itself a new medium and creative space where reflection, theological conversation and active embodiment happen. A powerful example is Sweet’s book “*So Beautiful*”, which is featured on Facebook. This online community is an active conversation on the ideas in the book, a community of friends and a theological space giving continuous life to the book.

A new era of connectivity calls for the rediscovery of what it means to be *ecclesia*. One is reminded of research to establish what actually was new and different in Calvin’s Geneva, in comparison with the medieval period that preceded it. Busch (2009:8) highlights the fact that, for Calvin, the economy and the ethics of public welfare must be in harmony: “By confronting the competitive thinking with the idea of togetherness and solidarity, he stood against the economic trend of his time” Recalling recent research, he states that, according to Calvin, “restored humanity is not individual but social.”

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15 [www.gemeentes.co.za](http://www.gemeentes.co.za) accessed on 16 Jun. 2009. Van Wyk writes: “Net so verbaas soos die Israeliete was oor die brood uit die hemel (Eks 16), so is sommige vandag nog verbaas oor die mikro-gesprekke van Twitter. Dit is nou as mense enigsins weet van die bestaan van Twitter, darem al sedert 2006 met ons (Jack Dorsey)! En waar die vraag van die Israeliete, “Wat is dit dié?” , of in Hebreeus, “manna?”, die naam geword het van dié brood, is tweets die naam van die 140 karakter gesprekke op Twitter.”

16 See “#hackedu” from the Twitter platform.

17 See “#tekste” from the Twitter platform for the participatory worship services of the Dutch Reformed congregation Lynnwood.

## The impact of uploading

The more digital culture becomes, the more participatory it gets (Sweet 2000:55). Uploading is about the harnessing of the power of communities through participation. It enables anybody to produce products of substance and complexity without the need for a hierarchical organization or institution. It magnifies the capacity of individuals to generate their own stories and inscribe themselves on the world, both as individuals and as part of communities (Friedman 2006:483). "A person's resource and relational network establishes that person's influence." (Miller 2004:111)

Uploading is the logical consequence of a participatory culture, and Sweet's (2000:60) observation that people will make sacrifices for the good of the whole, that human systems are self-organizing and that people can be trusted to invest wisely of their resources and time, explains the driving force behind uploading. Typical forms of uploading are the community-developed software movement, Wikipedia<sup>18</sup> and blogging/podcasting. This is creating new possibilities for participation and is propagating a participatory culture and the possibility that everyone can be a co-editor – a phrase coined by Sweet (2008:33), indicating that participation now entails the possibility of editing other peoples content in real time. "Participation drives the medium more than content or emotion. The line between artist and observer blurs." (Miller 2004:113)

The power of participation was dramatically illustrated in the recent creation of one of the best-rated advertisements in the USA, the so-called *Doritos*-campaign. The advertising agency invited viewer-made advertisements for Doritos. The winning entry was screened at the Super Bowl. The reaction overwhelmed them. By way of participation an advertisement was created for a fraction of the usual cost. Another example is the popularity of participatory TV programs, such as *Idols*.<sup>19</sup> In a note sent to me by Sweet, using Facebook, he remarks: "Books need to be reinvented as social media . . . one-way communication is over. Margaret Feinberg even went so far on her blog to invite her readers to submit words that they would like to be in her next book, and the first 1000 would get their word in print. Immediately she in effect sold 1000 books, plus has 1000 evangelists out there telling people about the book they helped 'author'."

Uploading has as yet unforeseen consequences for theology and especially public theology. Miller (2004:83) described the emerging of intentional communities as a digital remake of communal living, allowing the reconstruction of the components of an extended family and community. The surprising growth in web-based virtual communities through Facebook vindicates Miller's earlier observation. Fluid networks of mutual interest are taking the place of rigid and polarized special interest groups (Miller 2004:113). It is fascinating to observe the abundance of intentional communities participating in a lively public theology in South Africa.<sup>20</sup>

This impact of uploading has vast implications for the ability of communities to participate in "global"<sup>21</sup> processes and influencing communities on an unprecedented scale. As a shrinking 18 Wikipedia (according to Wikipedia – accessed on 29 April 2009) is a free, multilingual encyclopedia project. Its name is a portmanteau of the words wiki (a technology for creating collaborative websites, from the Hawaiian word wiki, meaning 'quick') and encyclopedia. Wikipedia's 12 million articles have been written collaboratively by volunteers around the world, and almost all of its articles can be edited by anyone who can access the Wikipedia website. Launched in January 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, it is currently the most popular general reference work on the Internet.

19 The re-invention of cricket in the T20 format serves as another example: in the broadcasting and staging of these cricket events, much is made of crowd and viewer participation: there are interviews with the players while the game is in progress, children are dunked in water whenever a boundary-shot is played.

20 To mention but a few where public theology is practiced in one or another way: Emerging Church Conversation in South Africa; Ministers in support of the Burmese monks; Tuks Theologie; Matt 28:19 Go and make Disciples!; I'm Orthodox and I love it!; Creation vs. Evolution; 3rd place; I'll sleep when I'm dead; Emerging missiologists; The Emergent church.

21 Global and local.

globe increases the particularity of place, the value the future will place on local, indigenous identities, cannot be overstated (Sweet 2009:197). The opportunities facilitated by uploading and the endless possibilities to harness the love of faith communities brings a new dimension to what it means to be a missional church. Participating in God's mission, setting things right in a broken, sinful world, restoring it to what God has always intended, can gain new momentum. It opens previously unheard of opportunities for the development of the priesthood of all believers.

### **A new era of in-forming**

In-forming refers to the fact that never before in the history of the planet have so many people – on their own – had the ability to find so much information about so many things and people.

Google hopes that in time, with a cell phone, everyone everywhere will be able to carry around access to the entire world's knowledge in their pockets (Friedman 2006:178). Friedman (2006:181) says that "In time, individuals will have the power to find anything in the world at any time on all kinds of devices – and that will be enormously empowering." Miller (2004:79) says that our very basis of knowing and understanding is shifting to an inter-active, global, anytime, anywhere, multimedia experience with countless sources to explore and test. He warns: "Our minds and bodies will undergo yet another rewiring to support this different sensory experience." In this new era, characterized by Google, Yahoo and MSN Web Search, truth is collective and contextual, and people will "... reach for the wisdom of the ages and seek to recontextualise it within their community and setting." (Miller 2004:87) It is indeed a new era characterised by the most fully engaged, broad-based, explicit and calculating medium of information and formation ever experienced.

The church is summoned to discern this pattern for living the truth which is collectively reassembled.

A new model of pastoral leadership appears to be emerging, which will produce a very different kind of church in the future. The New Testament pattern of each congregation being led by a team of spiritually mature leaders is receiving new emphasis. The equipping model, based on Ephesians 4:11-12, stresses the primary function of nurturing and leading the congregation so that each believer grows and finds his or her unique function and ministry within the body. This model may be carried out through a range of possible culturally viable patterns. Its main principles include (1) plurality or team leadership, (2) mutuality and consensus decision-making among the leaders, rather than top-down authority, and (3) a primary focus on enabling all believers for their particular gift ministries and spiritual priesthood. If the equipping model is adopted broadly, some anticipated results could be a greater emphasis on and practice of the priesthood of believers, the emergence of alternative forms of pastoral training and the reformulation of seminary curricula (Snyder & Runyon 1987:68).<sup>22</sup>

### **CALVINISM IN THE EYE OF THE STORM**

The transition into a digital, global and flat world is changing our sense of time and history, pulling the future into our awareness. The impact can indeed be described in strong, stormy language, as it is already busy re-shaping the church and the very world into which the church is sent to participate in God's mission. Churches in the Calvinist tradition face an even more daunting task – given that the image of Calvin is controversial and today often presented in a negative perspective. Like no other Reformer of the 16th century he has become the victim of clichés (Report 2007:1). Meanwhile, the world faces a Perfect Storm. In this storm we need a 22 See McNeal (2009:133-147) for an elaboration on practical possibilities of a new kind of missional leadership.

transition on global scale, a “new story, rooted in ancient wisdom, whose characteristics include partnership, co-operation, compassion, community well-being, sharing, humility and non-violence.” (Phibbs 2009:41)

The church is challenged to discern God’s work and presence in this transition, and to creatively form and reform its ministries, offices, structures and communication of the Gospel. This time of transition “... is a passionate environment in which to work out one’s salvation with ‘fear and trembling’”. (Miller 2004:87) Calvin’s theology of *calling* and living *coram Deo*, might just be more helpful than ever.

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## KEY WORDS

Creativity  
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**TREFWOORDE**

Deelnemend  
Globalisering  
Inligting  
Kreatiwiteit  
Kontekstualisering  
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