A theological study of doing god's mission using social media technology

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of the theology of doing mission using social media

technology especially in the 21st century when trends of communication are

being disrupted due to the rapid globalization due to the advent of the

Internet that is continuously changing the life of people on every continent. Realizing that there are negative things associated with social media technology, the study will explore biblical foundations of how technology was used to worship God and how communication was mediated in the Bible to witness towards those who were far from those who carried the good news.

Background of the Study

If what Roxburgh and Remanuk wrote is to be considered applicable to the Seventh-day Adventist church now, doing mission in this 21st century cannot be the same as it was previously. The world today is faced with rapid globalization that has come at a faster rate than what many people anticipated. During the past ten to twenty years, the world has seen a rapid globalization disruption that has changed life on every continent in nearly every way. It is now common to hear many people referring to the world as a global village: that it is a single community connected by telecommunications. In this paradigm change, it is not only the church that has been affected. Business, politics, economics, health, and social relations are all affected by this change.[1]It is a change that has brought a new dawn of reality that calls for newer approaches in handling business in the 21st century.

Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) is one of the key participants in God's mission. In order for the SDA Church to continue being effective in its mission of spreading the gospel around the whole world as mandated by the Gospel Commission (Matthew 28: 18-20)[2], a change in mindset is needed. In addition, the church's effort to evangelize the whole world must

lead us to find the best way of doing mission in this generation. As soon as the world experienced this paradigm change, businesses and government entities followed suit in changing their way of transacting their businesses. [3]

The use of technology as a medium for propagating the gospel is not a new phenomenon. According to Justin Wise, the ink and scroll that the Apostle Paul and others used in their effort to spread the good news were considered the latest, most advanced version of a product or service of their time. Similarly, the printing press was the cutting-edge technology that helped Martin Luther spread Bibles all over Germany and eventually, around the world.[4]In our time now, social media is a cutting-edge technology that many churches and pastors who are interested in missions have used to preach the gospel to the masses that they would have difficulties reaching if this medium of communication were not available.[5]

Social media is a form of self-directed mass communication that allows people to communicate freely with each other without the hassles of going through some channels that institutions of society for socialized communication set.[6]The advent of social media technology has given a wider range of platforms that accords all users a broader range of choices of which platform to use because all these technologies have one common theme—that of affording its users an ability to publish quickly on the Web and communicate instantly with their audience.[7]

As much as the world is making strides to overcome the challenge of not welcoming social media, we still have some in ministry who believe in false

ideas that look at social media with negativity. According to Meredith Gould, there are three major false ideas: (a) it is not real, therefore, nothing generated with or from it is authentic; (b) it undermines church, therefore, it cannot be used to inspire attendance or participation; and (c) it should be considered a nonessential luxury because it takes too much time to learn and use.[8]

Finally, others think technology divides more than it unifies, for individuals and communities easily separate into those " high-tech" and " low-tech" groups. Therefore, what we are experiencing today is a challenge that must be solved because it has both sociological and theological implications that, if not addressed well, will mean that our new mission's strides to provide diversified means of communicating the gospel by using social media technology will be in vain.

Technology has a history of not being welcomed by religious groups that dates as far back as the early to mid-1990s when the Internet and billboards were just beginning. Baab recorded how some religious leaders sounded an alarm about online community in the early and mid-1990s when online bulletin boards and Internet groups were in their infancy. Religious groups argued that " online relationships could not possibly be real community, and online opportunities for religious connection would seriously undercut congregational life."[9]However, those from high-tech communities argued that online community was an opportunity for truly democratic communication.[10]This debate has created enough evidence of why it would be important to conduct a study that tries to bring some theological concepts that address both concerns.

Problem Statement

The theology of using social media technology in doing God's mission is not well established, hence the requirement to conduct this study with the purpose of exploring theological concepts that can open up discussions leading to the acceptance of the SDA

Church to include social media technology in doing mission today.[11]Susan Codone conducted similar studies and all the authors agrees about the need of using social media for the *missio Dei* , and that it should be studied further so that a sound theological premise may be established. Therefore, this study will explore the biblical mandate for technology and how using social media technology in spreading the gospel is within God's framework for doing missions in this technological culture where most of its communication is mediated by the Internet.

Significance of the Study

The study will add knowledge to the study of missions. The findings of this study will provide a theological framework for those who want to take God's mission onto social media technology can use it as reference that can lead them to establish their theological foundation for engaging in such a mission. The study will introduce me to some theological concepts concerning the theology of communication in doing mission by using social media technology that, in the future, will become my major research work.

THEOLOGY OF TECHNOLOGY

The study of Scripture together with God's marvelous works makes people conclude one thing—that God is the technology Genius who is also the big Fan of the good technology that man has invented. God has brought things into existence out of

nothing, known as *ex-nihilo* in Latin. The Bible clearly states that everything that He created was repeatedly declared good (Gen 1). Alexander likened God's wisdom in creation to a craftsman who " filled with delight day by day by his creative actions" (Prov 8: 30).[12]Therefore, as we look at God's creation, we marvel at the beauty and wonders that come from the hand of God.

God loves technology and we should not be mistaken by His choice to confuse communication in Gen 11 when the people decided to build the Tower of Babel. Communication to God is the best tool, as can be seen in what He said: " Nothing they set out to do will be impossible for them." (v. 6). Wise described that unity as being incredible and providing synergy that was unstoppable. God's decision to stop such a powerful communication that created an incredible synergy was there for a special reason. According to Wise, God reacted in such a manner because the mistake that the people made was that they considered their success in having such a powerful technology as a sign that they were unbeatable. Their sin was not their use of technology in building that strong tower.[13]Wise said, " The people of Babel saw technology as the means by which they could overcome the limits of a sinful world and remain independent of God."[14]

Alexander shared the following points that highlight the biblical mandate for technology. First, God has endowed us with creative gifts that he expects us to use in the right way as His faithful stewards. In this understanding, technology takes the moral obligation that mandates us to use that creativity to give us the chance to continue living on earth. Second, God displays His technological intent through the three great technical projects that the Old Testament records: the building of the ark, the tabernacle, and the temple. These technological developments had three-fold intentions: God wanted them to be a place to worship by obeying God (Gen 6: 22; Exod 35: 10), not excluding the provision of the sanctuary for His glory (Exod 40: 34–35; 2 Chr 6: 12–7: 10).

The other purpose was that coming up with these technologies provided an opportunity for the creative gifts that were bestowed on humanity to be utilized and developed. For example, we find Bazalel who, after being filled by the Holy Spirit, had the technical skills and ability to craft various things by using craft designs of gold, silver, and bronze and also by working with wood (Exod 31: 3–5). Therefore, the sanctuary did not only give glory to God, but people's talents were also recognized and used in the right way.

Another benefit for those projects that God initiated was that they provided relational community enterprises that enhanced a very important element in society—teamwork (Exod 31: 6–11; 35: 30–35). In addition to that benefit, the technical skill contribution was to emanate from the spirit of giving freely to God (Exod 35: 21–29). Finally, God expected the people to follow carefully and exactly the instructions that He had given for the building of those infrastructures, knowing that their primary intention was to give glory to

God, not man. Hence, the expectation was that no shoddy work be done because " worship involved the full and accurate use of God's gifts and of God's materials."[15]

Paul's letters show that the church was built on the back of technology. Wise suggested that the letters Paul wrote allowed him to be " present" in multiple places at once. By " present," the author did not mean being physically present. He was present in the sense that the discipleship instructions in the letters led many to accept the Holy Spirit and bear fruits in their respective lives. Furthermore, we can appreciate how those letters made him present not only to those in jail while he was imprisoned in Rome, but even to those across the entire region where his letters were sent.[16]In other words, the writing technology that allowed him to put God's work in ink extended Paul's reach when the circumstances he was in prevented him from physically visiting the people.

THEOLOGY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media as a platform that is web-based enables mobile technologies to turn communications that humans do into an interactive dialogue. Merriam-Webster defines social media as forms of electronic through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.[17]Thomas G. James, in his online article *The Theology of Social Media,* highlighted the fact that in our changing world, the new technologies that we have can enhance the way churches do mission if properly used. James looked at social media outlets as important instruments that we can use to fulfill God's mission that also seeks to establish good

relationships with people as well as making disciples. The major argument in James' article is that when we enter into those relationships, we should do so with the love and grace of God so that those we

relate with can see God reflected in us. Jesus was an express image of the Father and whatever He did reflected the Father. Jesus said, " Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me" (John 12: 45). Therefore, when we establish relationships through social media, we must reflect to others how God is working in us. This is the best witness that we can give to the world when we learn to use social media responsibly. The fact that an estimated 500 million on Facebook and over 140 million Twitter users are active each month, without mentioning users in other social media outlets means a bigger opportunity that the use of social media can contribute to in doing our mission work.[18]

When we look at Jesus' life, we find that He was a man who, regardless of being God, would have chosen to separate Himself from the evil context in which He lived. Instead, Jesus mingled with the people—with no reservations. He immersed Himself into the culture that was far from being perfect because He had a mission to win souls. It is worth noting that the world He was in was filled with all sorts of evil like pagans, idolaters, hypocrites, swindlers, fakes, and people full of chaos. Jesus rubbed shoulders with both the saints and those considered sinners. Jesus interacted with all, regardless of their age, social status, ethnicity, or fame.

Literature Review on Doing God's Mission

Using Social Media Technology

Answering the question as to why sharing God's Word online is important, Wise quoted *Wall Street Journal* blogger Garry Hamel who in his lecture at the 2009 Leadership Summit said, " The Facebook generation does not want to go to a church that

feels like a corporation. They want a flexible community that has a cause—a cause that they can organically help create."[19]This is the outcry that today's generation yearns for. If you have a church with young people, incorporating them into social media ministry that aims at sharing God's World on the Web is the best way to help these millennials get connected with the mission of the church. In this age, information is shared fast. Furthermore, throughout every major communication shift in history, people of faith have been at the forefront of change. In speaking about the printing press during the time of Luther, Aimee Semple McPherson and radio broadcasts, or Billy Graham and his televangelist crusades, Jesus' people have always seized the opportunities placed before them for the sake of the kingdom.[20]

In the Good Samaritan story, Jesus expanded the understanding of those whom we call our neighbors. Jesus broke the boundaries of division and included Samaritans as new neighbors. Today, our neighbors are not only those who are next door, but even those who are in remote areas. Social media has brought an online community that is our new neighbor. Paul included a foreword in his book " *Social Networking & Cyberspirituality* that says, " The world is one large village interconnected above the surface by what is called the Internet. From internet has germinated social media which has taken the world by storm… Social media today is the most common form

of communication that has made communication instant."[21]Paul defined a neighbor as any person with whom we can be connected on the net regardless of where that person is.

The mention of an online neighbor calls for the need to find the best way on how to answer the question Jesus asked in Luke 10: 25–37: " Who is my neighbor?" Answering this question, Lochhead said, " Building virtual reality is electronic community building" that he calls electronic neighborhood." [22] Therefore, in our context, we can also say that online community is one more neighbor Jesus wants us to take care of—as offline neighbors with whom we share geographic locations. There is a need for the church to make itself present to the online community as well because it is another platform for evangelism. Sparado said:

The Church is naturally present where humans develop their capacity for knowledge and relationships. Announcing a message and relationships of communion have always been two of the founding pillars of her being. The task, therefore, does not have to be how to *use* the Web well, as is often thought, but how to *live* well in the era of the Web. In this sense, the Web is not a new *means* of evangelization but is, above all, a context in which the faith is called to express itself not by a mere willingness to be present, but by the compatibility of Christianity with the lives of human beings. [23]

Therefore, Christianity will only be appreciated if the senders (missionaries) remove themselves from their comfort zones and enter the circles of those who are secluded in order to establish godly relationships that reflect the true love of God that urges people to accept Christ as their savior.

Literature Review That Does Not Favor Social Media

Technology as a Good Platform for Missions

While we realize that technology is shaped by human will, it is important to spell out from outset that, on its own, technology is neutral.[24]This implies that it is just a tool that can be used either for good or for evil. Buchanan said, " Technology is essentially amoral, a thing apart from values, an instrument which can be used for good or ill."[25]The neutrality of technology made Schuurman sum it up in this way: " It's not technology itself but what you do with technology that counts. However, every technology is value-laden. In other words, people who create these technologies embed in them their personal or corporate values."[26]As a result, these technologies are biased toward certain uses, which, in turn, bias the user in particular ways.

Cultural critic Neil Postman explained well the non-neutrality of technology as follows; " Embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense of skill or attitude more loudly than another."[27]Furthermore, Postman said, " New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop."[28]

Another aspect of looking at technology is considering its content. Marshall McLuhan came up with the statement that " the medium is the message," suggesting that the messages embedded in technology are more significant than any content that may be used to deliver. The rationale behind McLuhan

statement was that " the content of a medium is like juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind".[29]Another problem that comes with the Internet is its openness. Wise said, " Internet allows anyone with desire to start a blog, a Facebook page, or an online video channel, in most cases for no charge."[30]Wise's concern was that this is a platform that enjoys a wider coverage than what many TV stations can afford, but there " is little to no regulation around them."[31]Most TV stations have some regulations that the Internet does not have. This is a big concern to many churches and parents because they are always worried when they consider what social media is able to offer to their children with a less restricted to non-restricted Internet.

While we recognize the social ills that social media brings to the society, it would be a grave mistake to think that " faith-based communities are immune to social's reach."[32]Wise argued that the local church is an organization filled with people who always communicate. Therefore, he suggested that when the way that people communicate with each other changes, the organization also needs to change. Megachurches, house churches, and everything in between are affected by the change, and the people in it, including young and old, are not left out of this change. No wonder many pastors or faith-based organizations today are suggesting, to those who want to control how people post on their social media platforms, that there is no way to control the online conversation surrounding their church, business, or organization. He said that the only thing that can be done is take steps that can give a positive influence.[33]

IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY TO OUR MISSION

In doing mission, contextualization is very important. Koch said, " Contextualization is a way to express our specific message to new audience, packed and interpreted into a new way, so the message as the sender can be relevant, understood and adopted by the receiver."[34]In order to contextualize, Christian mission becomes relevant first by understanding biblical theology and what it means to be church.[35]Koch suggested that the ability to contextualize into a culture " calls for reflection on what in particular a culture is, and how to contextualize it."[36]Therefore, a church must have a knowledge of the culture the people live in and find a way to communicate to that society in which the church is a part.[37]Christian churches must have knowledge of the situation and try to develop an effective way of communicating with the society where the church is found. [38]

Instead of just ignoring or condemning the use of social media technology for mission due to its weaknesses of replacing human effort with technology and personal interaction with online communication, the church must also look at the opportunities that could be lost by not using social media. Living in the 21st century, when the use of social media is so pervasive and has become part of our culture, means that churches involved in mission must do much research and find a balanced view on how social media can expand their quest to evangelize the whole world. Mission endeavors must take into consideration what Janett Yates said in describing Phil Schneider's emphasis in urging all Christians to carry the banner of Christ and walk with it boldly into this " strange land" of social media with confidence, clarity, and compassion.[39]

Those doing missions should always remember that their impact on society will only be appreciated when they mingle with the people they are interested in reaching with the gospel. We are called to be the salt of the world and must remember that salt will only be appreciated if it is mixed with what it is added to. Nobody appreciates salt that is in the salt shaker until it is added to the food that is to be eaten. Therefore, Christianity will only be appreciated if the senders (missionaries) remove themselves from their comfort zone and enter the circles of those who are secluded with the purpose of establishing godly relationships that reflect the true love of God that urges people to accept Christ as their Savior. Wise quoted a good statement by Martin Luther: " If you preach the gospel in all aspects with exception of issues which deal specifically with your time-you are not preaching the gospel at all."[40]We now live in a mediated culture that calls for the church to pretend no longer that they are not affected by the influence of social media and technological development. This concurs well with what Karl Barth said about doing theology with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other.[41]

CONCLUSION

In doing mission, there is a need to exhaust every means to reach the culture that is absorbed into media, and technology is another dimension worth expanding as we live in the last days. According to Campbell and Garner, mission in a mediated or networked and technological culture focuses on how people reorient themselves toward God and begin a trajectory of movement toward Christ as the center of their lives.[42]

The church today has numerous people like the tribe of Issachar who can see where God's call on the church's lives could take them. Unfortunately, many of them are not taken seriously because they do not have the exact administration as the 12 tribes of Israel did where one tribe was specifically given the talent of providing guidance in times when Israel failed to see God's direction and advising about the best course to take. However, the SDA Church today has the Spirit of Prophecy that provides guidance when we are not sure of what course to take. Through the pen of Ellen White, we have advice on how churches should accept the development of anything that the world brings out that is new.

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[1]Allan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 7.

[2]18 And Jesus came and said to them, " All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

[3]In those days, businesses took their product and services online and today we have many online stores that are flourishing and compete with businesses that have physical buildings. Online marketing and sales used to be considered bogus, but today many people buy things online and make real transactions online because Internet is more real than it used to be considered virtual.

[4]James Wise, *The Social Church: A Theology of Digital Communication* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 14.

[5]Peter White and Cornelius J. P. Niemandt, " Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches' Mission Approaches," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 24, no. 2 (2015): 241-269.

[6]Cornelius J. P. Niemandt, " A Network Society, Social Media, Migration and Mission," *Missionalia* 41, no. 1 (2013): 30.

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[9]Lynne M. Baab, *Reaching Out in a Networked World: Expressing Your Congregation's Heart and Soul* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), 109.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Timothy P. White, " A Missiological Study of the Role of the Baptism and Infilling of the Holy Spirit in Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches" (PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 2014); Francis Benyah, " The Use of the Mass Media by Charismatic Churches in Ghana: A Case Study of Perez Chapel International"(MPhil thesis, University of Ghana, Legon, 2015).

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[13]Wise, *The Social Church* , 43-44.

[14]John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 104.

[15]Alexander, " Worshipping God with Technology," 2.

[16]Dyer, *From the Garden to the City* , 110.

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[18]Thomas G. James, " The Theology of Social Media," *Learning Ideas,* January 2, 2013, https://www. churchleadership. com/leading-ideas/the-theology-of-social-media/.

[19]Wise, *The Social Church* , 96.

[20]James, " The Theology of Social Media," 50.

[21]Jim M. R. Paul, *Social Networking & Cyberspirituality: Towards a Theology of Networks* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017), 92.

[22]David Lockhead, *Theology in a Digital World* (N. p.: United Church Publications, 1988), 34.

[23]A. Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), ProQuest Ebrary.

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[25]Robert A. Buchanan, *Technology and Social Progress* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1965), 163 *.*

[26]Schuurman, *Shaping a Digital World* , 14-15.

[27]Neil Postman, *Technology: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 13

[28]Ibid., 13.

[29]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 18.

[30]Wise, *The Social Church* , 43.

[31]Ibid., 44-45.

[32]Ibid., 45.

[33]Wise, *The Social Church* , 46.

[34]Henrik H. Koch, ed., *Contemporary Missiology: Concepts and Contextualization of Mission in Context and the Cape Town Commitment* (N. p.: Koch Publishing, 2017), 32.

[35]Ibid., 32.

[36]Ibid., 63.

[37]Ibid., 65.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Jeanette Yates, " The Social Christian: A Theological Exploration of Social Media," *The Church Marketing That Sucks* , November 6, 2017, http://www. churchmarketingsucks. com/2017/11/social-christian-theological-exploration-social-media/.

[40]Koch, *Contemporary Missiology* , 79.

[41]Yates, " The Social Christian," 79.

[42]H. Campbell and S. Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 13.