

## A Disruptive Gospel: Missional Perspectives in Christian Distance Education.

Thank you, Mary, and others, for the invitation to speak with you this evening. I bring greetings from the Faculty, Staff, and Administration of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. That is, however, the last thing I will be saying tonight in my official capacity as an officer of the school. The rest of this is my fault. One of the benefits of these sorts of gatherings for me is that I am reminded of this; as those who stand at the intersection of Christian Formation, Pedagogy, and Technology, not a single one of us has this figured out. It reminds me not to be frustrated. Furthermore, I hope that this evening we can encourage one another to see the unique excitement of being in our posts at such a time as this.

Over the next few minutes, I'd like us to walk through the theme for our time together, and connect it to the reality in which we're working. We're going to look at how gospel hope can be found in times of disruption. We're going to use the "Missional" aspect of our theme to surface this hope. To start off with, let me remind us that we're not the first in history to find the world changing rapidly around us.

I studied History in my undergraduate work. Specifically, I looked at labouring classes in the immediate pre and early Industrial Revolutionary periods in Britain. Little did I realize that I was actually studying, "How to prepare for the digital revolution in Higher Education." If they had billed it that way, there would have been more of us in the major, I'm sure.

Let me give you an example. How many people in this room are familiar with the term "Luddite?" How many of you have accused others of being, "Luddites?" How many of you have been accused of being "Luddites?" Many people define "Luddites" as a group of people who hated technology. There is, in our popular use of the term, "The myth that Luddites were no more than simple ignorant men reacting instinctively, but hopelessly, against the march of progress."<sup>1</sup>

I bring this up because when properly understood, "Ludditism" is an emotional reaction we all have to identity-threatening change. The followers of the invented personage, "Ned Ludd," or "General Ludd" were weavers, mostly in the English Midlands, who has seen factory owners disrupt an ancient system of apprenticeship. New types of machines could prepare raw materials to be made into cloth much more quickly - this was fine, in and of itself. No one resented the machines. What they resented were the fact that unskilled laborers from outside of the trade's guild could be taught to use these machines. Yes, some of these men destroyed machines as acts of civil disobedience. Yet only the machines of owners who ignored their customs and traditions were destroyed. In some cases, only one machine in a factory would be damaged. It was not the frames themselves that were the targets, but shop owners trying to undercut the traditional way weaving was done.

The "customs and laws" in your institution, be they stated or unstated, are being changed. We all feel it. Staff differently than faculty, faculty differently from Trustees & administration. I think, however, that we have to be careful to distinguish a mistrust and antipathy for the changes that result from technological progress, from an antipathy for

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<sup>1</sup> Rule, John. *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England, 1750-1850*. New York: Longman, 1994. p. 369

the technology itself. The former can be coached and helped; the latter is simply defeatist.

*So much for disruption. It is part of history, and what we know is that once you move forward, you can't undo the changes. So how does the gospel relate to disruption?*

Well, the pattern we have seen is one of relationship, traditions, and customs being forcibly changed (in this case by a movement in technology), then changed again. There is an analogue here in the gospel. We see the very picture of how man should relate to God in creation. Then comes the Fall, and all creation is fouled. You can't ever return - we're expelled from the garden, from the garden-like relationship with our maker, and the garden-like relationship with the cosmos, and each other. We see the Mosaic Covenant - and the people accept for themselves an agreement they can't fulfill. Then it's broken (Jer 31) - and there's no going back to it. Not until Christ's second covenant do we see a final form of how men and women will relate to God. And even though we can, in Christ, anticipate an "Eden-like" destiny with the Lord, it isn't Eden. Eden is broken, gone, forever. The revelation of the gospel throughout Scripture and history is one peppered with the disruption of sin - individual and collective - and the atonement and mercy of God. The principle of disruption is a gospel principle, and this is the source of our hope this evening: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."(Gen 50:20)

History, technology, soteriology - they point to the fact that disruption is hard-wired into a fallen world. You can never go back to the way things were. No Luddite rage will restore the culture or craft of a given profession. But there is hope here. Because we see disruption in the progressive revelation of God's saving plan, we see a high principle emerge: God uses disruption redemptively. The technologies and cultural shifts that destroyed everything East Midlands workers loved about weaving also gave rise to the Sunday School model, attempting to give children knowledge of literacy and Scripture on their one day off from the Factories in late 18th C England. God uses disruption redemptively.

We have been encouraged, as we gather for this conference, to tend to our roots: Simple, Missional, technological. Christian. The history of God's mission for His creation, and the history of technology tell the same story: Upheaval in an imperfect world, which is then redemptively used for God's purposes. When the disruption is costing us our jobs, or in some cases everything we love about our jobs, how can we, in the midst of unwelcome changes, see the redemptive power and purposes of God in them? The answer is this missional piece - let's use the perspective of God's mission for the world as a lens through which we see the upheaval in our schools. Using that lens, let's look for redemptive elements or trajectories that can give us hope.

Among those at the turn of the last century who were asking deep questions about missions were James Engel & William Dyrness in their short book, "Changing the Mind of Missions." The tool we will use to find redemptive hope in the disruption our industry now faces is a paraphrase of 3 of the questions in their book. They are:

i) We must relate to the "Holistic Gospel" As Understood by the Majority Church

Please note that in using this term, "Holistic Gospel," I'm not referring to the "Social Gospel." I'm referring to the life-changing message of Christ's atoning death,

resurrection, and return, and sinful humanity's need to repent and believe. Please understand that to the majority church, distinction between the gospel, and power it has to reform communities, is entirely artificial and contrived. One of my team members recently traveled to Nigeria for a meeting of his Anglican Diocese. Yes, the bishop of his church plant in Philadelphia is from Nigeria. Here is how he saw the gospel in their church: "This brings me to the second of two reasons why I believe God has worked so powerfully in and through the Church of Nigeria, and that is, quite simply that they believe. They believe. "Simple earnestness" were the two words I recorded in my travel journal again and again... They believe and trust in the Holy Scriptures... They believe and trust in God's designs for the human race, the human family, the human body-politic. They believe and trust in the simple message of sin and redemption by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. They believe and trust in Jesus. They believe. There is no more powerful catalyst for joy, hope, transformation, and church growth than this."<sup>2</sup> A holistic gospel is an integrative gospel. Everything they are about is rooted in the gospel, and relates to that mission. They know how to join God at what He's already doing. I'm not sure that's as true of our endeavours.

We know what success looks like when an aspiring scholar makes tenure, or is finally published in a peer-reviewed journal. We know how to measure and celebrate when we cross the 75% mark on a capital campaign. We know how to measure enrollment, projected enrollment, and gross reserves. What we don't know how to celebrate is the work of God in our students, through our students, and through the staff and faculty members of our institutions in the churches of our communities. We know how to reward Nicole Rim, our Graphic Designer at GCTS, for a highly-rated edition of our "contact" magazine. We have no idea how to celebrate her pioneering work among the gang-ridden population of Cambodian youth just North of Boston.

We can measure the net revenue loss of our Boston campus, but we have no way to celebrate the role it has played in the largest religious awakening in American history - the so-called "Quiet Revival" that has happened in Boston over the last 40+ years (more souls have come to Christ within this revival of the ethnic churches in Boston in the last 30 years than in the entire Great Awakening<sup>3</sup>). The role of our Boston campus in this revival has been described by one local church leader this way, "'I think [GCTS Boston] is the most important Christian organization in the city, because you are backfilling theology into this movement that could have gotten weird, and it has not. There are a lot of strong churches today because there are so many hundreds of... graduates out there that have learned theology."<sup>4</sup> Despite its role in this movement of God's Spirit, the campus still isn't revenue positive.

Here's the problem: our institutions don't have a business model that fits the work God wants to be about. It's not technology, or new educational modalities that are disrupting our ability to make money as a school; it's the gospel that is disrupting our

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved March 1, 2015, from <http://www.christ-church-anglican.org/notes-from-the-rectors-desk/in-the-name-of-jesus-a-report-from-nigeria>

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved Feb 26th, 2015, from <http://timothytennent.com/2011/10/17/the-quiet-revival/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://egc.org/print/769>

ability to make money as a school. God is doing a work, and He wants us to be a part of it. We haven't figured out how to leave our "nets" and follow Him. Yes, he once blessed us with a lot of fish. It wasn't circumstantial evidence that we were supposed to keep fishing as our business model for the rest of our ministering lives - it was to earn our trust in Him. If we obey Him, we prosper. The disciples weren't called to keep throwing nets in - and we aren't called to keep up buildings, residential *or* distance programs, tenure, journals, or anything of the like - if He has already left the boat and moved on.

## ii) The Decoupling of Education from the Managerial Apparatus that Supports It

The second missiological idea that I'd like to co-opt in order to find gospel hope amid disruption starts with a question: Why do students choose to study at your school? Let me back up - why do students choose to pursue a degree at all? Well, as those who teach mostly in the Humanities, we would start to line up noble arguments about being well-rounded, literate people, reflective practitioners, and the like. The proposition we offer the parents of a 17 or 21 year-old prospective student is this; "Give us your student, and we'll give them a learning experience that deepens their faith, while they achieve a credential that will land them a job." Some more enlightened parents may care more about the former than the latter, but the latter will safely catch the ears of all of them.

This has historically been our proposition, since the afore-mentioned industrial revolution ushered out apprenticeship, and ushered in modern mass education. Recently, however, we begin to see serious chinks in the armour of this value proposition. Allow me to demonstrate. There is a Toyota plant in Georgetown, KY, that is making the same promises to 17 year-olds and their parents. They hire the students out of Secondary school, and put them immediately to work with a respectable wage. As they work, students work through carefully created degrees put together for them from the best online options available.<sup>5</sup> Here's the data-driven promise they can make to their graduates: "Almost all of the students who complete the program end up with a job. The starting salary for an advanced manufacturing technician at Toyota is close to \$65,000 a year. With overtime, pay can be as much as \$80,000. That's more than the median starting salary for graduates of the highest-earning bachelor's degree programs in the United States"

All of that, and no debt. Now, compare that with your promises of "well-roundedness". What of the 45-yr old RN from Atlanta, who feels the Lord calling her to children's ministry at a small Hispanic church meeting in a storefront. We offer an MA of some sort, or an M.Div if she really feels called to a vocation in ministry, and an ordination track. Logos Bible Software, meanwhile, will give her 8 courses, with top-tier Seminary faculty, and an advanced software package, for about \$90 a month.<sup>6</sup> Your degree may be fully online, or partially online. But if its training she wants, not a degree,

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<sup>5</sup> Retrieved Feb 27, 2015, from: <http://www.americanradioworks.org/segments/toyota-college-degree-program/>

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved Feb. 27, 2015, from: <https://www.logos.com/product/49669/mobile-ed-bible-and-doctrine-foundations-bundle>

what is your value proposition for her? Similarly, members of the Anglican Diocese near our main campus have formed their own “Seminary.” Called “St. Aidan’s Institute”, it will teach ordinands and interested laity, and enable ministry for church planters who can’t support student debt.<sup>7</sup> Because it is the ordaining body that is constructing the curriculum, accreditation is not really an issue for them. What is our Seminary’s role - do we view this as a threat, or an opportunity?

At some point, we have to ask ourselves, what is our ministry to our students, both current and prospective? Is it putting them through the “experience of college”, with all its trappings, buildings, chapel services, and libraries? Or is it to prepare them for kingdom usefulness? Do we have a business model for the “unbundling” of our educational “packages”, or do we truly believe that apart from taking every course on that degree checklist, we have nothing to offer these kind of students?

There is hope in this disruption: if we could find a way to balance our books based on the number of unique faces and callings that are blessed by what we have to offer, instead of FTE, we could reach out to the Toyotas and St. Aidan’s institutes, and be part of the solution they are offering to their graduates. What if we convinced the degree curator at Toyota that explorations of ethics and spiritual realities was as important a part of their student’s lives as calculus? How many lives could be changed? That’s our mission - and there is hope for us, if we focus on that.

### iii) The Displacement of the Local Church From Its Rightful Place At the Centre of Kingdom Endeavour

Our first thought about the relationship between the local church and our schools is, sadly, centered around recruitment. While this is the lifeblood of a Seminary, I’m sure many of your admissions teams in Bible colleges miss the ease of attending large Denominational youth rallies, where the students largely “came to you.” In a post-denominational landscape, the “fishing” is harder.

The Post-Christian realities of the North American context do account for a lot of our enrollment woes, but I think we’re missing the larger point if that defines the discussion of the relationship between the church, and the Higher Ed institutions we represent.

Allow me to illustrate the point that this is a culture issue for us. At some point in our thinking, the role of Bible College or Seminary “Professor” became more prestigious than the role of pastor. Encouraging this thinking through our educational products (DMin, PhD, ThD, adjunct status), journals, and “Guest Speaker” privileges at churches, we have created a breed of animals that have consumed all of the available grass in the pasture. So many young students go through our programs with the thought, “I don’t know why they bother teaching me this pastoral ministry stuff - I plan to teach”. There are no jobs in North America for Seminary-discipline PHD’s. Telling your students otherwise is an act of falsehood. How might it change the narrative if we were the ones honoring pastors, instead of them having to honour and recruit for us? What if the responsibility we felt towards our alumni was as strong as that which we feel for our

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. <http://www.ad-ne.org/st-aidans-institute/>

freshman? Maybe that would help to reverse the fact that, according to ATS statistics, only 41% of our M.Div holders will be in ministry in a local church.<sup>8</sup>

Gordon-Conwell's Academic VP, Dr. Richard Lints, has observed that, in order to grow, we need to build our identities as "parasitic on the church rather than the academy". I am not questioning that the research and peer-reviewed inquiry in all our Christian School disciplines blesses the church. I am wondering if we have tried to move out of the servant quarters, and into the Master's rooms. It's time we learned our place as Christian higher educators. In the kingdom of heaven, your role as Sunday School teacher outranks your role as "College Professor."

Do your Bible College students attend church regularly? Is there any component of your curriculum that encourages or requires them to? Is it enforced? How can you make a promise to be a place of spiritual nurture for students during their college years, if they're not tightly connected with a local church? Why aren't the chemists, nurses, doctors, psychologists, therapists, and others in local congregations being swamped with requests for them to mentor aspiring young professionals in their fields? Why does any local church within 25 miles of your campus still need nursery workers, youth group leaders, or people to contribute articles for their newsletters?

What if the Bible and Theology disciplines at your school were taught entirely by ministry practitioners? What if you sought donor funding for a co-chair; half Seminary professor, half pastor for a struggling local congregation. What if all of your faculty had to raise 1/5 of their salaries via fund-raising or employment at a local church? Who loses, really, in that bargain?

### Conclusion:

We can find the blessing of God as we focus back on the true nature of the work He has called us to do, and join Him in it. We can deepen our reach and accessibility by providing prospective students the programs they need, not the ones our business models were built to provide. And we can ensure our success if we serve the church, instead of trying to upstage it.

Here's my call for you tonight. When you get back to your room, do a google maps search for churches around your institution. How has your school's commitment to the gospel improved their outreach? How have your educational activities strengthened their leaders? How do your students and faculty serve at these churches? Do you even know the names of any of their pastors?

God is Sovereign. The disruption of sin in the garden didn't prevent Him from being able to have a relationship with men and women. The disruption of the Mosaic covenant, and subsequent exile, didn't prevent Him from forming a people for Himself. Not all technological changes are good; but there is no force bearing on God's servants that God can't work out for their good. And that promise - that we are on mission with a Sovereign God, is our source of hope. Thank you.

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/seminary-graduates-not-always-ministering-from-the-pulpit/2013/05/17/d50b17ea-bd71-11e2-9b09-1638acc3942e\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/seminary-graduates-not-always-ministering-from-the-pulpit/2013/05/17/d50b17ea-bd71-11e2-9b09-1638acc3942e_story.html), retrieved Mar 3, 2015.